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THE KING IN HAMLET

BY

HOWARD MUMFORD JONES
Associate Professor of Comparative Literature

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE SERIES No. 1

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The benefits of education and of useful knowledge, generally diffused through a community, are essential to the preservation of a free government.

Sam Houston

Cultivated mind is the guardian genius of democracy. . . . It is the only dictator that freemen acknowledge and the only security that freemen desire.

Mirabeau B. Lamar

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ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

To my earliest and
kindest critic

David Orland Coate

PREFACE

I am deeply indebted to my colleague, Professor Robert A. Law, for having read the proof of this bulletin, and for saving me from many errors.

Line references throughout are to the *Cambridge Shakespeare*.

This bulletin was authorized in April, 1921, but is numbered in the 1918 series in order to complete the series for that year in conformity with postal requirements.

THE KING IN HAMLET

I

"Hamlet," said Professor Kittredge in his admirable memorial address on Shakespeare, "is a family tragedy." This is probably the first profoundly original criticism of the play since Goethe's famous "oak-tree in a costly vase." I mean by that not to deny the insight and genuine truth of many studies of *Hamlet,* notably Werder's and Professor Bradley's, but to indicate that Professor Kittredge forces us back to first principles, compels us to look at the play as though we knew nothing about it—compels us, in short, to look at the play which Shakespeare wrote instead of the acting version that most of us have in mind when we think of *Hamlet.* For to most of us *Hamlet* is the tragedy of the prince of Denmark, and at once we think of Hamlet in black, Hamlet soliloquizing, Hamlet instructing the players, Hamlet and the grave-diggers—passages which great actors have made memorable and which Bernard Shaw, not unnaturally, finds tedious and a little dull.

Hamlet is a family tragedy. The *Hamlet* that is acted is not a family tragedy, but a traditional perversion of the play which, in its way, is as far from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as the modern Shylock is from his Jew of Venice. No play is so swaddled in traditions. Back of these traditions lies always the conviction that Hamlet is the center of the tragedy, so that we have a foolish phrase about *Hamlet* with Hamlet left out. Now, that Hamlet is the center of the play nobody will deny, but it is in a sense very different from that in which the actor thinks of the tragedy. For a center implies a circumference, and with our insane love of the star system we have had many Hamlets, each the center of the play, but in no case have we had the circumference which Shakespeare plainly indicated should be there. For, when the star has cast himself as the prince, he casts his ablest

assistant as Polonius, and his leading lady as Ophelia, though how any tragic actress can overlook the amazing Gertrude in favor of a trite mad scene, passes understanding. Then, in the next order of importance, come the grave-diggers and Horatio, and after them the smaller fry—the ghost, Laertes, Rosencrantz and his twin, and, to judge by the traditional production, the king and queen last of all.

On the stage the king is usually played by a robustious fellow in a red wig who tears a passion to tatters, splits the ears of the groundlings, and blunders through five acts of Shakespeare's most complicated intrigue with no evidence that he has ever read the play. Perhaps it is the star's instinct that leads him to subordinate the king and make him an Elizabethan Herod who needs only to swear by Mahound to have stepped off a mystery stage; for, were the role once given half the study lavished upon that of the first grave-digger, it is possible the king might become what Shakespeare created, a role that approaches the star's in dramatic interest. The five acts of *Hamlet* are, in Professor Kittredge's phrase, a long duel between two adroit and skillful men, but the Claudius that is played on the stage is a bogey-man. There the divinity that doth hedge a king is degraded below the intelligence of a villain in melodrama, and as a result Hamlet has nothing to fight against, so that the critics have had to fall back upon sublime theories about his weak will and his inner conflict.

And the queen, if not so completely neglected, is always subordinate to the trite Ophelia—largely, I suppose, because Ophelia goes mad like Lucia in the opera, and with the same theatric unreality. A lady in a red gown who lets herself be managed, a coarse, vulgar woman who, after a scene with her son that is usually staged like something from Victor Hugo, is perfectly brazen five minutes afterward and throughout acts four and five betrays no more consciousness of the inner conviction of sin than a wooden thing—this is the queen as she is played. But in point of fact Shakespeare dealt very subtly with her: contriving, for instance, after the closet scene that she shall appear (except at the close)

always in conjunction with the innocent Ophelia, living or dead. By this contrast he sought, I think, to make all the plainer her deep sense of tragic guilt, her suffering, her broken heart. But this is what tradition has done for us: it has shifted the emphasis in *Hamlet* from the royal family to an extraneous group, to the family of Polonius as their orbits are perturbed by the erratic hero, a prince out of their star.

Hamlet is a family tragedy. It is first of all the tragedy of the reigning house in Denmark. Only incidentally do they engulf their dependents and courtiers—Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Polonius and his children, and Horatio, left friendless and alone to tell the story right. This is the tragedy that Shakespeare drew and one to which I hope some day a company of intelligent actors will return.

II

Of all the tragedies *Hamlet* is the richest in what we nowadays call local color, and it seems as if Shakespeare, however he got his information, goes out of his way to paint vividly the Denmark that he saw in his mind. Indeed, writing for audiences so prejudiced in favor of regarding all times and climes as if they were colonies of Elizabethan England, it would seem as though Shakespeare, who, as a great practical dramatist, had his ear to the ground, would not have put in so much that was strange and foreign to his hearers if he did not have a dramatic purpose in view.

Denmark is, to Shakespeare, a military nation as the king tells us in a speech from the throne. The play opens with soldiers doing sentry duty as though it were war-time, and indeed, war is threatening with Fortinbras, and nobody knows what may happen. The sentinels are on the *qui vive*: in the very opening lines we find that when Bernardo challenges Francisco (itself a reversal of military procedure), the latter (who has not seen the ghost and apparently knows nothing about it) will not respond save by another challenge, which in a sense he repeats by inquiring suspiciously if this be Bernardo or no. And the scene, as if to mark the

martial tenor of the play, is not the castle of Elsinore, but one of the fortifications around it, a platform on an inaccessible cliff

> "That beetles o'er his base into the sea."
> (I, iv, 71)

This was necessitated by the exigencies of the Elizabethan stage.

> "*Elsinore. A platform before the castle, Francisco at his post. Enter to him Bernardo.*
> *Bernardo.* Who's there?
> *Francisco.* Nay, answer me: stand, and unfold yourself."
> (I, i, 1-2)

Then Bernardo gives the usual reply (like our "Who goes there? A friend"), but even this does not satisfy the suspicious Francisco:

> "*Bernardo.* Long live the king!
> *Francisco.* Bernardo?
> *Bernardo.* He."
> (I, i, 3-5)

To which Francisco responds:

> "You come most carefully upon your hour,"
> (I, i, 6)

a strange response if Francisco is expecting Bernardo to relieve him, as the following dialog shows. In a well disciplined military establishment like Elsinore promptness should occasion no remark. Why does Francisco speak of it? Indeed, why is Bernardo almost over-prompt in his coming so as to draw this comment from the rival of his watch, a veteran accustomed to discipline, except that Denmark is threatened with war, ghosts are walking, and martial ardor prevails, with not a little martial nervousness?

A little later Marcellus, who seems to be a young recruit and not, as it were, in the military councils, gives us a most graphic account of the haste and urgency of the Danish

war preparations, to which we shall have by and by to return. Horatio, in a long speech full of jejune legal phrases, recounts the threatened embroilment with Norway, the issue of which nobody can tell. The situation is delicate: it is not unlike the D'Annunzio adventure in Fiume, and it is a situation that obviously calls for great tact and skill in statecraft:

> "young Fortinbras,
> Of unimproved metal hot and full,
> Hath in the skirts of Norway here and there
> Shark'd up a list of lawless resolutes,
> For food and diet, to some enterprise
> . . . to recover of us, by strong hand
> And terms compulsatory, those foresaid lands
> . . . by his father lost."
>
> (I, i, 95-104)

That is why conditions are unusual in the castle:

> "this, I take it,
> Is the main motive of our preparations,
> The source of this our watch;"
>
> (I, i, 104-106)

and in the nation as a whole:

> "and the chief head
> Of this post-haste and romage in the land."
>
> (I, i, 106-107)

Norway has her *terra irredenta,* and it behooves Denmark to move carefully if she is to avoid a quarrel.

Into this atmosphere of highly-strung uncertainty comes now the ghost. Let us, if we can, try to rid ourselves of our prepossessions at this point, and forget that we know why the ghost walks. If the play were new to us, if the ghost were as inexplicable to our blasé minds as it is to Marcellus and Bernardo and Horatio, we should see that Shakespeare is again bringing before us what only our long familiarity with the play forbids us seeing, namely, the perilous position of Denmark; and at the same time he is providing

us with a dramatic "surprise" of unfailing success, when we discover later that the reason why the ghost walks is something startlingly new in the play, and quite different from the plausible and erroneous reason he so dexterously dangles before us.

We first hear of the ghost from Marcellus, who makes no guess at the cause of its appearance. This is not surprising because we have already seen that Marcellus is a new recruit, unfamiliar with even the current gossip as to the Norwegian situation. But Horatio, who is a "scholar," explains the threatening war; he realizes the perilous position of the state; and it is he who jumps to the not unnatural conclusion that the appearance of the dead Hamlet is due to the uncertainty of the political situation. It bodes, he says,

> "some strange eruption to our state."
> (I, i, 69)

and it reminds him of other troubled times; a scholar of the Renaissance, he has Roman history at his fingers' ends, and he draws a parallel:

> "In the most high and palmy state of Rome,
> A little ere the mightiest Julius fell,
> The graves stood tenantless, and the sheeted dead
> Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets:"
> (I, i, 113-116)

then perhaps something is lost from the text, and the speech concludes:

> "even the like precurse of fierce events. . .
> Have heaven and earth together demonstrated
> Unto our climatures and countrymen."
> (I, i, 121-125)

Bernardo, an older and more experienced soldier than Marcellus, has reached a similar conclusion on independent lines, for we must not imagine that he has listened very attentively to Horatio, or that the information is new to him. When Horatio has finished his lesson to the admiring Marcellus, Bernardo remarks:

"Well may it sort that this portentous figure
Comes armed through our watch; so like the king
That was and is the question of these wars."
(I, i, 109-111)

When he saw the ghost Bernardo's mind was running on the king as a military figure, for he exclaimed:

"In the same figure, like the king that's dead,"
(I, i, 41)

and in his following speech:

"Looks it not like the king?"
(I, i, 43)

Horatio adds later:

"Such was the very armour he had on
When he the ambitious Norway combated;
So frown'd he once, when, in an angry parle,
He smote the sledded Polacks on the ice;"
(I, i, 60-63)

and Marcellus tell us that he walks

"With martial stalk."
(I, i, 66)

Was it not currently reported in France that Joan of Arc returned in armor to lead her soldiers against Germany? The elder Hamlet is the hero-soldier of the Danes. We have his picture:

"that fair and war-like form
In which the majesty of buried Denmark
Did sometimes march."
(I, i, 47-49)

He is "our valiant Hamlet," "a goodly king"; he has beaten old Fortinbras in single combat, and taught the fear of Denmark to his successor, as Voltimand's speech (II, ii, 60-79) plainly shows, and of course his best tribute is the reverence

and affection of his son. If the ghost of such a one returns to earth, the state must be indeed in danger, and so Horatio, in the midst of his formal exorcism, anxiously adjures him:

> "If thou art privy to thy country's fate,
> Which, happily, foreknowing may avoid,
> O, speak!"
>
> (I, i, 133-135)

Only when he receives no answer does he go on to the more commonplace explanation that the ghost has buried treasure to guard—a part of the formal ghost-lore of the times, and in no sense a reflection on the elder Hamlet's character.

Even the young prince, who is almost ludicrously ignorant of state affairs and who at no time displays the slightest interest in, or knowledge of, government, even young Hamlet is impressed by the general uncertainty.[1] We must not forget that, though he may be suspicious ("my prophetic soul!"), he has, so far, not the slightest intimation of the manner of his father's death; with egoistic moodiness he objects to the bad taste of the hurried wedding, the possible theological complications involved,[2] and the implied lack of affection on his mother's part—"a little more than kin and less than kind," so to speak, "within a month . . . she married."[3] When Hamlet is told about the ghost and learns that it is an armed figure, he is very much puzzled. He asks directly whether they are not mistaken, cross-examining the witnesses like a lawyer:

> "*Hamlet.* Arm'd, say you?
>
> *Marcellus.* } Arm'd, my lord.
> *Bernardo.* }
>
> *Hamlet.* From top to toe?
>
> *Marcellus.* } My lord, from head to foot.
> *Bernardo.* }

---

[1]It is for this reason that he is able to cloak his real purposes under the ambiguous, but to his friends, natural

> "The time is out of joint."
>
> (I, v, 189)

[2]See below p. 65 ff.

[3]I, ii, 145-151

Hamlet. Then saw you not his face?
Horatio. O, yes, my lord; he wore his beaver up.
Hamlet. What, look'd he frowningly?
Horatio. A countenance more in sorrow than in anger.[4]
Hamlet. Pale, or red?
Horatio. Nay, very pale,"

(I, ii, 226-233)

with much more, and it is evident that Marcellus and Bernardo do not like the implied reflection on their veracity. Now, Hamlet may not know exactly in what costume his father died, but a man sleeping in his orchard is not likely to rest comfortably in

"the mediæval grace
Of iron clothing."

In other words, when the ghost died, he had no armor on, something that Hamlet either knows or can very well guess, and as it is the convention for ghosts to walk in the costume in which they were murdered, Hamlet's first conclusion that his father was the victim of foul play, is cleverly thrown awry.[5] So perforce he falls back upon the other explanation: if his father has returned because of the extremity of the Norwegian situation, if he has returned, in other words, as a warrior-king, he not only may, but must, come

"Armed at point exactly, cap-a-pe."

(I, ii, 200)

As the embodiment of martial spirit, he will look "frowningly" and "red," and Hamlet is the more puzzled when he finds that the hero-warrior presented

---

[4]Inasmuch as Horatio has explicitly informed us of the ghost that "so frown'd he once," we must suppose that this statement represents his second judgment. It does not altogether contradict his first description, but is certainly a serious modification of it.

[5]The ghost afterwards appears "in his habit as he lived" (III, iv, 135). The device of the armor having served its purpose to mislead Hamlet—and the audience,—Shakespeare abandons it in favor of "everyday clothes" confirmatory of the assassination, and that at a time when his mother's astonishment might trouble Hamlet's belief in the spirit.

"A countenance more in sorrow than in anger."
(I, ii, 231)

Yet it occurs to him that a king brooding over his country's fate will be sorrowful rather than angered, so that perhaps the explanation of Horatio and his comrades is correct. For when Hamlet's friends have gone, the prince's first thought is of the armor:

"My father's spirit in arms!"
(I, ii, 254)

and of its meaning:

"All is not well;
I doubt some foul play: would the night were come!
Till then sit still, my soul: foul deeds will rise,
Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes."
(I, ii, 254-257)

We forget that, to one who had never read *Hamlet*, this statement is ambiguous and, as it were, misleading: it fits in with what we know of the murder; but it also chimes with Marcellus's naive remark:

"Something is rotten in the state of Denmark,"
(I, iv, 90)

the last thing we hear about the ghost before Hamlet's interview. Some public calamity overshadows the nation, as indeed is true but in a different sense from Marcellus'. How carefully Hamlet and Horatio keep their secret and how, if the ghost story leaked out as such stories do, the Marcellus explanation became the current one, is shown in the very last of the play when, the king being stabbed, the affrighted courtiers cry out (to their own detriment should young Hamlet live and become king), "Treason! treason!" I dare say a tradition lingered long in Elsinore that old Hamlet, foreseeing that his crazed son would stab God's anointed, returned to earth to prevent the crime and failed; for I do not suppose that Horatio's explanation (delivered under the

armed protection of that hated foreigner, Fortinbras) was unanimously adopted, any more than I suppose we shall ever agree on the right and wrong of the murder of the Duc d'Enghien. But let us return to the play.

When Hamlet first sees the ghost it is the warrior-king theory that he has in mind. He addresses the spectre first of all by his name, as anyone would naturally do, and immediately afterwards thinks of him in his political capacity:

> "King, father, royal Dane!"
>
> (I, iv, 45)

that is, head of the state and of Hamlet's family. For the prince says to Horatio, who has so far broken all court etiquette as to lay hands on Hamlet's sacred person:

> "My fate cries out,"
>
> (I, iv, 81)

that is, Hamlet's destiny as king of which, after his uncle's promise, he expects to hear; and one so negligent in statecraft as he, may well fear the reproaches of his father's ghost.

And a little later Hamlet, alone with the ghost, again refers to the puzzling problem of the armor:

> "thou, dead corse, again in complete steel,"
>
> (I, iv, 52)

which I should punctuate as I have written it, and not with a comma after *again,* so as to make it modify the *revist'st* of the next line. I think Hamlet is struck, as Shakespeare meant him to be, by the fact of the ghost's being in arms, and Hamlet, as a wit and a scholar, is saved from the redundancy, *again revisit.* All this, as I read the play, is Shakespeare's device for whetting the uncertainty of his audience, and his way of telling us at the same time of the dangerous political situation in Denmark. Into the error that old Hamlet has returned to save the state, everyone falls so that the revelation of the ghost comes as a fearful shock even to young Hamlet. It is true, he dislikes his

uncle, but none of us likes to think of even his most boresome relative as a red-handed murderer.

The relation of Denmark to its conquest, Norway, is then extremely grave, nor is this all. We are also informed, according to the accepted rendering, that there has been trouble in Poland in the late king's time, who

> "smote the sledded Polacks on the ice."
> (I, i, 63)

A little later in the play young Fortinbras attempts to trick Denmark into an attitude of "benevolent neutrality" that would inevitably draw that state into a second Polish war. He has got his uncle to request permission, through Voltimand, for his troops to traverse Danish ground on their way to Poland: obviously the easiest and safest way for the expedition, as a glance at an appropriate map will show. Voltimand brings back

> "entreaty. . .
> That it might please you to give quiet pass
> Through your dominions for this enterprise,
> On such regards of safety and allowance
> As therein are set down."
> (II, ii, 76-80)

One is reminded of the ex-Kaiser's request to Belgium. King Claudius meets the situation ably: he announces his favorable disposition ("It likes us well"), but the matter is too grave for a quick decision and he wisely postpones an answer:

> ". . . at our more consider'd time we'll read,
> Answer, and think upon this business."
> (II, ii, 81-82)

Claudius may be a murderer, but he is no fool: indeed, as I hope to show, he is precisely the type of king Denmark needs, and his wise delay bears fruit. For when we first see young Fortinbras (Act IV, scene iv), he is, after the manner of *condottieri*, marching impudently through Danish

territory, but he finds himself sufficiently embarrassed for want of the needed permit, to send a captain back after one.

> "If that his majesty would aught with us,"

exclaims this royal adventurer,

> "We shall express our duty in his eye,
> And let him know so,"
>
> (IV, iv, 5-7)

prefacing his command with the brazen assurance:

> "Fortinbras
> Craves the conveyance of a promised march
> Over his kingdom."
>
> (IV, iv, 2-4)

So far as we know Claudius never promised anything of the kind. But the general belligerency of Fortinbras's attitude is the excuse for the lie, an attitude that is sufficient comment on the peril of the situation. Denmark must steer carefully not to offend either Poland or Fortinbras.

The desperate game that Claudius is forced to play is further complicated by the problem of the Danish succession. Fortinbras has his eye on the Danish throne. Claudius is striving to prevent precisely what Hamlet, who has no knowledge of statecraft, goes out of his way to bring about—

> "I do prophesy the election lights
> On Fortinbras: he has my dying voice."
>
> (V, ii, 347-348)

How ignorant Hamlet is of the situation, and how delicate is the diplomatic give and take is sufficiently to be remarked by his naive observations about the "little patch of ground" which the captain, a professional soldier of the Renaissance type, who has no patriotism and who will fight for anybody so long as the pay be regular and the plunder good,[6] naturally

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[6]Fortinbras's expedition has an annual financial backing:

> ". . . old Norway, overcome with joy,
> Gives him three thousand crowns in annual fee
> And his commission to employ those soldiers,
> . . . against the Polack."
>
> (II, ii 72-75)

and cynically disparages. Hamlet takes the captain's ironic description at its face value:

> "Truly to speak, and with no addition,
> We have to gain a little patch of ground
> That hath in it no profit but the name.
> To pay five ducats, five, I would not farm it;
> Nor will it yield to Norway or the Pole
> A ranker rate, should it be sold in fee."
>
> (IV, iv, 17-22)

In popular parlance the captain is "sore" because he sees no chance for loot. Hamlet ingenuously responds:

> "Why, then the Polack never will defend it."
>
> (IV, iv, 23)

This remark amuses the captain, who dryly tells him it is already garrisoned, whereupon Hamlet, who will not suffer anybody to contradict him, continues in his lofty way:

> "Two thousand souls and twenty thousand ducats
> Will not debate the question of this straw:
> This is the imposthume of much wealth and peace,
> That inward breaks, and shows no cause without
> Why the man dies."
>
> (IV, iv, 25-29)

As a comment on secret diplomacy this is almost funny, and coming from the future ruler of Denmark, it argues an amazing ignorance of foreign affairs, But Hamlet concludes in his lordly manner:

> "I humbly thank you, sir,"
>
> (IV, iv, 29)

and the astonished captain, having been read this lesson in the stupidity with which states are governed, responds with mock courtesy and sardonic significance,

> "God be wi' you, sir,"
>
> (IV, iv, 30)

and goes out, I assume, to have his laugh. God will need to be with Denmark should Hamlet ever become king. Then Rosencrantz asks:

> "Will't please you go, my lord?"
>
> (IV, iv, 30)

But Hamlet is obstinate, as is frequent with him, and stays.

What is this "little patch of ground" that the lordly Hamlet, who knows so little about statecraft, thus despises? Like Helgoland in the late war, it possesses an importance altogether out of proportion to its merits, and it is partly to deceive Hamlet that the captain speaks as he does. It is on the frontier. Hamlet, like the tyro that he is, asks whether the expedition is directed

> "against the main of Poland, sir,
> Or for some frontier;"
>
> (IV, iv, 15-16)

and being told it is the frontier, concludes that the expedition is both pointless and fruitless. But in war, frontiers are important, and this patch of ground fronts Denmark as we know, for Fortinbras is to reach Poland by marching over Danish soil. Wherever it is, it will not yield to Norway or to Poland; and it is an admirable position for watching Denmark—the country Fortinbras has his eye on all the time; so admirable, indeed, that in the last scene of this eventful history we find him walking into the Danish capital, the English ambassadors in tow, with the nonchalance of a gentleman entering his front door.[7] More than Hamlet—Denmark itself has fallen.

It is usually assumed that Fortinbras has some rights to

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[7]Horatio's astonishment at the "coincidence" of Fortinbras's arrival with the fall of the Danish royal house is naive, but characteristic:

> ". . . so jump upon this bloody question,
> You from the Polack wars, and you from England
> Are here arrived, give order that these bodies
> High on a stage be placed to the view."
>
> (V, ii, 367-370)

Instinctively he turns to someone else for orders.

the Danish crown, partly because of the dying Hamlet's speech, but mainly because Fortinbras says so:

> "I have some rights of memory in this kingdom."
> (V, ii, 381)

But I have searched both the play and the sources in vain to find what this right may be. That Fortinbras has some right to the crown of Norway, which his father, in a romantic and impracticable manner,

> "Thereto prick'd on by a most emulate pride,"
> (I, i, 83)

so strangely forfeited, may be true: Fortinbras's uncle, however, like Hamlet's, is on the throne, we do not know why. But the crown of Norway is not the crown of Denmark. Fortinbras has not the slightest shadow of a right to the Danish crown except the right of the strongest. Like Frederick the Great when he stole Silesia, Fortinbras believes in action first and explanation afterward, and having with all his forces captured Elsinore, he announces his "right" entirely in the cool manner of other robber captains. Like Frederick he is safely vague as to the nature of these "rights"—they are merely "of memory," and like Frederick, perhaps, he will set his lawmen to making out a legal claim later. A moment after, indeed, he gives the whole thing away: in invading Denmark, as he bluntly remarks, he comes because his "vantage" invites him to put in a claim for the crown. In good set terms, he watched his opportunity and seized it. Denmark has been, it is true, an elective monarchy.[8] But with a Norse garrison in the capital, a display of military force the first act of Fortinbras's occupation[9], the royal dynasty extinct, the melodramatic tale of Horatio to show up the rottenness of the late family, and a return to the good old custom of the election as a popular

---

[8]See p. 62 ff.

[9]Note the four captains, the dead march, the "rites of war" with their opportunity for display, and the final injunction:

> "Go, bid the soldiers shoot."
> (V, ii, 395)

cry, Fortinbras is entirely secure in his new possession. He will, it is true, scrupulously adhere to the forms of succession:

> ". . . call the noblest to the audience,"
> (V, ii, 379)

he will display a punctilious respect for the last prince of the house of Hamlet:

> "Let four captains
> Bear Hamlet, like a soldier, to the stage;
> . .. . for his passage,
> The soldiers' music and the rites of war
> Speak loudly for him,"
> (V, ii, 387-392)

a convenient combination of force and flattery; and he is most anxious to speak well of the young prince:

> ". . . he was likely, had he been put on,
> To have proved most royally,"
> (V, ii, 389-390)

a generalization that will please the Danes, and means nothing. Fortinbras' succession is, nevertheless, fundamentally a matter of force, and the Danes, though they do not want him, must take him. The hollowness of the election law is evident—something we must bear in mind.

It is to prevent all this that Claudius has been working. He knows that the Danes want a Danish king. Hamlet is popular, he says, for the sole reason that, following Claudius's announcement, he is known to be the successor to the throne:

> "He's loved of the distracted multitude,
> Who like not in their judgement, but their eyes,"
> (IV, iii, 4-5)

at once a shrewd judgment of Hamlet and the nation. It is on Hamlet that popular hope is fixed: is he not

> "The expectancy and rose of the fair state,"
> (III, i, 152)

as even the simple-minded Ophelia knows? Claudius tells Laertes of

> ". . . the great love the general gender bear him;
> Who, dipping all his faults in their affection,
> Would, like the spring that turneth wood to stone,
> Convert his gyves to graces."
>
> (IV, vii, 18-21)

The anxiety of the king is first of all to make Hamlet a sagacious and competent ruler, and he directly reminds him of his duties as heir apparent:

> "You are the most immediate to our throne,
> . . . For your intent
> In going back to school in Wittenberg,
> It is most retrograde to our desire."
>
> (I, ii, 109; 112-114)

When Hamlet reluctantly consents to remain at Elsinore, the king is happy:

> "Why, 'tis a loving and a fair reply:
> Be as ourself in Denmark. . .
> This gentle and unforced accord of Hamlet
> Sits smiling to my heart."
>
> (I, ii, 121-124)

People have ignored, it seems to me, the gravity of the general interest in Hamlet's marriage. If he be not married, the royal line will become extinct. His marriage is a question of state. Says Laertes:

> "His greatness weigh'd, his will is not his own;
> For he himself is subject to his birth:
> He may not, as unvalued persons do,
> Carve for himself; for on his choice depends
> The safety and [the] health of this whole state;
> And therefore must his choice be circumscribed
> Unto the voice and yielding of that body,
> Whereof he is the head."
>
> (I, iii, 17-24)

If he loves Ophelia, Laertes thinks it can be

> "no further
> Than the main voice of Denmark goes withal."
> (I, iii, 27-28)

But when it seems that Hamlet's is, indeed, a grand passion, Ophelia's family sings a different tune: Polonius hurries to the king, for if Ophelia becomes queen in Denmark, it will be a great day for him—something he had overlooked:

> "By heaven, it is as proper to our age
> To cast beyond ourselves in our opinions
> As it is common for the younger sort
> To lack discretion."
> (II, i, 114-117)

And that Hamlet may be mad for Ophelia seems to the queen so happy and so convenient an event that when Polonius reads the letter he has had from his daughter, Gertrude cries out:

> "Came this from Hamlet to her?"
> (II, ii, 113)

Polonius, before proceeding with the matter, craftily assures himself of the matrimonial rating of his family at court, later protesting, of course, his entire disinterestedness:

> "*Polonius.* What do you think of me?
> *King.* As of a man faithful and honorable.
> *Polonius.* I would fain prove so."
> (II, ii, 128-130)

The Polonius family is popular with the multitude as a relic of the "good old days": witness the Laertes tumult. So the royal family agrees that Ophelia will make an excellent wife for Hamlet.

> "I do wish,"

says Gertrude to Ophelia,

"That your good beauties be the happy cause
Of Hamlet's wildness: so shall I hope your virtues
Will bring him to his wonted way again,
To both your honours,"

(III, i, 38-42)

a strong hint which carries Ophelia so high into the clouds (does she not practically woo Hamlet in the beginning of that famous scene?) that Hamlet's treatment of her comes as a dreadful smash, and her first thought afterward is of Hamlet and the position she has lost through his "madness":

"O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!
The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword:
The expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
The observed of all observers, quite, quite down!
And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,
That suck'd the honey of his music vows,
Now see that noble and most sovereign reason,
Like sweet bells jangled, out of tune, and harsh."

(III, i, 150-158)

Ophelia loves Hamlet sincerely, and this is some of the loveliest poetry in Shakespeare; all of which does not conceal Ophelia's natural interest in being crown princess, or prevent her politic father from endeavoring to keep alive the dying cause.

"It shall do well,"

he says of the king's determination to send Hamlet away,

"but yet I do believe
The origin and commencement of his grief
Sprung from neglected love,"

(III, i, 176-178)

and craftily suggests that the queen interview Hamlet: boys confess love affairs to their mothers; and also (in order, of course, to promote the fortunes of the family), that he

"be placed, so please you, in the ear
Of all their conference"

(III, i, 184-185)

and comes to his death, entangled in a double sense in this family tragedy. Ophelia's madness is mentioned by the king among the other cares of state that

> "come not single spies,
> But in battalions,"
>
> (IV, v, 75-76)

and cause popular unrest—something it would not do, I think, if she had not been talked of as a future queen; and when she is dead, the queen says with significant emphasis:

> "I hoped thou should'st have been my Hamlet's wife;
> I thought thy bride-bed to have deck'd, sweet maid,
> And not have strew'd thy grave."
>
> (V, i, 238-240)

The most eligible lady to be Hamlet's wife, and so to continue the royal line, is dead, and this is a bad thing for Denmark.

Thus the anxiety of the king and queen that the cause of Hamlet's "madness" be discovered—indeed, the anxiety of the whole court—Polonius, Guildenstern, Rosecrantz, even Ophelia—and of the nation generally (witness the grave-diggers), is an anxiety that, though it springs from mixed motives, springs also from the desire of the people, and the necessity of the court, to keep a Danish prince at Elsinore.

The news of Hamlet's "madness" spreads rapidly. Even the common grave-diggers are thoroughly conversant, as they think, with the whole matter. They know why he was sent to England. They feel furthermore that perhaps his case is hopeless:

> "if he does not recover his wits,"

says the First Clown in effect, and the wording of his jest hints at popular uneasiness. The king does his best; he is extremely patient with his nephew; and it is only when his own royal life is in danger, as the play scene and the death of Polonius tell him, that, in the dangers of the state, and as between the experienced uncle and the raw hysterical, and

unpracticed nephew, he reluctantly decides to sacrifice Hamlet. One or the other must go, and Claudius may save Denmark, and eventually—who knows?—get an heir to the throne. It is, if you will, a selfish performance, and Claudius' motives, like all human motives, are mixed, but his action is a considered one, and in view of Hamlet's lack of capacity for government, may well be for the good of Denmark:

> "Madness in great ones must not unwatch'd go."
> (III, i, 188)

In the meantime the popular uneasiness is such that Claudius covers up the news of the intended assassination, intending to present the people with a *fait accompli,* or perhaps slide the blame on England. He knows his peril. When Laertes bursts in upon him, he calls for his Swiss guard, realizing perhaps that the Danish troops are at this juncture not to be relied upon. But what can he do? Turn the state over to young Hamlet? Call in Fortinbras? Confess? Or save himself—and Denmark with him?

For it is not without meaning that Laertes' tumult is synchronous with Hamlet's return to Denmark, which the sailors, being under obligation to keep it secret,[10] have by their very mysteriousness rendered the more alarming. The romantic story of the voyage, the seafight and the escape, the hints and innuendoes about Hamlet's return, distorted into a thousand shapes,[11] have multiplied under the popular tongue until the Danes, ignorant of the truth but fearing that the "mad" Hamlet will never be king, that some trickery is afoot, that perhaps they have been sold to the hated Norseman Fortinbras, whose army is so conveniently near, are beside themselves with suspicion, and ripe for Laertes' appeals.

Even Hamlet is cognizant of the general uneasiness, and

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[10]They will not mention Hamlet's name even to Horatio, calling him "the ambassador that was bound for England" (IV, vi, 9-10).

[11]How well Hamlet knows the leaks in a court intrigue, witness the circumstantial oath he wrings from Marcellus and Horatio. (I, v, 169-181)

if the tumultuary state of the nation[12] breaks in upon his ivory tower, it must indeed be stormy sailing for the ship of state. "The age is grown so picked," he complains to Horatio, apropos of the grave-digger's impudence, "that the toe of the peasant comes so near the heel of the courtier, he galls his kibe." (V, i, 136-137.) The aristocratic prince is not fond of the odor of democracy. "How long hast thou been a grave-digger?" he asks in an effort to understand the yokel's disrespectful treatment of a gentleman, and the answer reveals at once the source of the national uneasiness, and the strong national pride: "Of all the days i' the year I came to't that day that our last King Hamlet o'ercame Fortinbras." (V, i, 139-140). It is the son of this same Fortinbras that now threatens Denmark. Look here upon this picture, and on this: "How long is that since?" asks Hamlet, and the clown, surprised at this ignorance, which is, after all, like these toplofty courtiers, responds: "Can not you tell that? every fool can tell that: it was the very day that young Hamlet was born; he that was mad, and sent into England," (V, i, 142-144), and whose recovery, the grave-digger hints, is extremely dubious.

The country thus deprived of its expectancy in the heir to the throne; the people keyed up to a high pitch of nervousness as a result of threats of war and flooding tales of all sorts—hints of treachery, sudden deaths, seafights with pirates from which the crown prince has miraculously escaped;[13] Claudius now under suspicion: comes into the situation Laertes, son of a dear father murdered, a father who was, moreover, a counsellor of the late king, killed no one knows precisely how or why, Laertes least of all. The foreign policy of Claudius must be of the sort that can not be clear to the people; and his domestic policy, originally well understood and approved, has become, by stress of circumstances, dubious and crooked. Laertes arouses the mob.

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[12]See below p. 36 ff.

[13]Apparently old Hamlet left the Danish navy in bad shape: we read of

"impress of shipwrights, whose sore task
Does not divide the Sunday from the week."
(I, i, 75-76)

The popular cry goes up, "Denmark for the Danes. Laertes shall be king!" which means, in fine, that Hamlet being, as they think, out of the question, they prefer a Dane to a Norwegian.

> "You false Danish dogs!"
>
> (IV, v, 107)

exclaims the queen with a curious insistence upon the nationality of the rebels, explicable only as we picture the state of popular feeling. The result is graphically described by a terrified courtier:

> "Save yourself, my lord:
> The ocean, overpeering of his list,
> Eats not the flats with more impetuous haste
> Than young Laertes, in a riotous head,
> O'erbears your officers. The rabble call him lord;
> And as the world were now but to begin,
> Antiquity forgot, customs not known,
> The ratifiers and props of every word,
> They cry 'Choose we; Laertes shall be king!'
> Caps, hands and tongues applaud it to the clouds,
> 'Laertes shall be king, Laertes king!' "
>
> (IV, v, 95-105)

The queen, thinking how her husband has labored for the good of Denmark, how, as we have seen, he has staved off Norway, exhausted displomacy to avoid an imbroglio with Poland and young Fortinbras (troubles that are the inheritances of the last reign); how patient he has been with Hamlet, putting, as the death of Polonius shows, his person and his policy into considerable danger, passes over Laertes as though he did not exist, and cries out in despairing astonishment at the fickle populace:

> "How cheerfully on the false trail they cry!
> O, this is counter."
>
> (IV, v, 106-107)

Not a word of Laertes or his treachery! This wonderful woman ignores him, to concentrate her sorrow and her scorn on the inability of the people to see what the whole court

sees, namely, that the king has labored throughout for the national prosperity. For the peril lies in the populace, not in Laertes, who, once inside the castle, instinctively returns to his class allegiance, contemptuously dismisses the people, and presents his wrongs. The Danes, terrified by their own boldness, and by the stately and determined presence of Claudius, hastily retire, and that monarch calms his wife's fears with the wise command,

> "Let him go, Gertrude."
>
> (IV, v, 123)

The question of the Danish succession, then, is grave, but as though these four problems were not enough, Denmark confronts a fifth. England, another conquest of old Hamlet's, is unruly. How or when the question first comes up we do not know, except that, like the Norwegian affair, it follows naturally upon a change of kings at Elsinore. We first hear of it incidentally in a talk of the king with his right-hand man, Polonius: the tribute money has not been forthcoming. (III, i, 169-170). Possibly Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have brought the news: they seem to be considered especially conversant with English affairs and may have come from there. But thereafter England rings through the king's speeches, until the Norse and Polish problems are forgot. Finance, after all, is the basis of power. Claudius first thinks therefore of sending the heir to the throne in solemn embassy to that country:

> "he shall with speed to England
> For the demand of our neglected tribute,"
>
> (III, i, 169-170)

and incidentally—what the king is hoping for—Hamlet may recover his health there. The presence of the heir apparent will at once flatter and intimidate the English; and it is only *after* the death of Polonius, with its clear note of menace, that the king changes his embassy and sends his nephew in charge of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Were we in doubt as to the importance of this English

business, there is plenty of proof. "There's letters seal'd," Hamlet tells his mother (III, iv, 202): that is, the embassy is going under sealed orders, and though we know the real reason therefor, it could not so be sent without arousing suspicion (this king has killed one man successfully and will hardly blunder with another), were it not that the gravity of the English situation makes them seem natural. We know furthermore that England has but recently been conquered—by Hamlet's father—and for Denmark to lose what she has just gained would be to damage her prestige irreparably. Says the king:

> "And, England, if my love thou hold'st at aught—
> As my great power thereof may give thee sense,
> Since yet thy cicatrice looks raw and red
> After the Danish sword, and thy free awe
> Pays homage to us—thou may'st not coldly set
> Our sovereign process."
>
> (IV, iii, 58-63)

Clearly, it is Denmark's iron purpose to hold her English possessions.

In the third place, from Hamlet's forgery of the royal commission, since he will make it as much like the original as he can, we can see with what gravity Claudius finds it necessary to address the officials in England. He writes, as President Wilson would say, a solemn declaration. Hamlet tells us it ran about as follows:

> "An earnest conjuration from the king,
> As England was his faithful tributary,
> As love between them like the palm might flourish,
> As peace should still her wheaten garland wear
> And stand a comma 'tween their amities,
> And many such-like 'As'es' of great charge,"
>
> (V, ii, 38-43)

and so on. Hamlet makes fun of these "As'es," but Hamlet is no practical statesman, and it is evident that the king found it necessary, in addressing England—and the document reads as if it were intended for public consumption—to issue a warning and a threat.

Lastly, this matter of the tribute is important enough to warrant a formal embassy from England to the court of Denmark, which Fortinbras, with his customary cold sagacity, has picked up and brought with him to Elsinore. We can not suppose that these ambassadors have come merely to announce the deaths of Rosencrantz and his fellow. Putting them out of the way is a minor matter: so far as the English know they are arrant knaves for whom "no shriving time" is "allowed." Fortinbras would not cling to the embassy were these mere messengers. It is the question of the dependency of England upon the Danish crown that is at stake: this is "our affairs from England" that "come too late," and only incidentally are the deaths of Hamlet's two school fellows the purpose of the mission.

A difficult diplomatic question with "old Norway"; a war in Poland into which Denmark can not afford to be drawn; the tactful handling of a successful filibusterer; the problem of the Danish succession; the ruling of a distant and disorderly province—these are the extraordinary conditions which a ruler of Denmark must face. That the situation requires extraordinary skill is obvious. Denmark is, furthermore, much in the world's eye, and anxious to make a good appearance. Polonius counsels Laertes, while remaining a Dane ("to thine own self be true"), to conduct himself in France like a cosmopolitan; Danish gentlemen flock to Paris, as we know from Polonius' instructions to Reynaldo,[14] where they become part of the international movements of the times, taking the Elizabethan grand tour, and imbibing all the fashionable vices, which Polonius catalogs with the envious admiration of a provincial. Polonius, by the by, apes the man-of-the-world air and the knowing wisdom of a Ben Franklin, who also lived in Paris and knew the world. French gentlemen come to Elsinore: witness Lamond, a Norman

> "the brooch indeed
> And gem of all the nation"
>
> (IV, vii, 93-94)

[14] II, i, 1-74.

who might go where he pleases but chooses Elsinore because it is becoming an important capital. Danish students flock to Wittenberg, where all the young men of the court from the prince down are educated. And at home young Osric is a type of the international fop, and the courtiers are of the international stripe: for example, the terrified conservative who, announcing the approach of Laertes' mob, complains that

> "Antiquity [is] forgot, customs not known"

as though it were a violation of the laws of nature for a crowd to lose its head. Denmark is, in fine, an important country, a conquering country, a country of which great things are expected; and there is double reason for sagacity in the conduct of its affairs.

But as though these difficulties were not enough, there is worse behind. I have already hinted at the character of the Danish court, and of the Danish people. The court represents a minority, and is not in sympathy with Danish ways. A king compelled to pursue the devious policy I have outlined above is compelled also to satisfy the demands of a rude, barbarous, and warlike people, who have successfully concluded three foreign wars under the late king, and now, flushed with victory, do not realize that their resources are exhausted. Frankly jingoistic, they have no patience with the delicacies of diplomacy; the queen's grievance is that this is so. They are a people possessing the military virtues, and the military vices, too; and Shakespeare, who did so much so easily, is careful to indicate that the task of governing Denmark is not rendered any easier by the character of its inhabitants.

The play opens, as I have said, with much military fanfare; young Marcellus, who is delightful, models himself on his elders, is proud that he is a "liegeman" to the Dane, and bids farewell to Francisco with a swagger—"honest soldier," he calls him, which must tickle Francisco mightily. Then there is more military talk, and suddenly Bernardo, a grizzled veteran who knew the old king, discovers Horatio,

the courtier-scholar, and in amused surprise that so silken a gentleman should turn out on the fortifications of Elsinore at twelve o'clock of a bitter cold night that makes even the hardened Francisco grumble, exclaims:

> "Say,
> What, is Horatio there?"
> (I, i, 18-19)

And the frozen Horatio gloomily responds:

> "A piece of him,"
> (I, i, 19)

a little later he testily growls:

> "Tush, tush, 'twill not appear,"
> (I, i, 30)

and for a while the ghost has lost its terror. Nothing could be more natural or more delightful, and nothing could be more illuminating, either, for it is from this hint of the gap between court and commoner that the whole Danish internal problem is developed.[15]

How thoroughly out of patience the commoners are with the court the talk of the grave-diggers shows. Moreover, the people are becoming restive: Hamlet has recognized the fact for "three years" (V, i, 135), and they are demanding a share in the government: "the ratifiers and props of every word," they cry:

> "Choose we; Laertes shall be king!"

They are tired of court elections, and as for the notion of choosing their own king, they

[15]When Hamlet, that "glass of fashion and the mould of form" comes on these battlements the next night, he straightway complains of the air that bites his royal person. "It is very cold," he says, and Horatio renders the antiphone: "It is a nipping and an eager air." This same Hamlet, by the by, son of a conquering king, marvels how "a delicate and tender prince" like Fortinbras can lead an "army of such mass and charge," an "example" to him, as he says, "gross as earth." By a fine irony, as soon as Hamlet complains of the cold in the platform scene, his father's cannon are shot off in honor of the national custom of getting drunk (I, iv and IV, iv).

"applaud it to the clouds."

Laertes' riot, accordingly, comes near to revolution: looks, indeed, "giant-like" and is "rebellion" (IV, v, 118).

If we reverse the point of view, we find the aristocrats equally at odds with the commoners. The vulgar get drunk, and Hamlet, applying the international standards he has learned abroad to local customs, complains that they get drunk, not like gentlemen, but like swine. Polonius is especially insulted when Hamlet calls him a common fishmonger; the phrase lingers with him, and the old gentleman, much nettled, announces that Hamlet is "far gone" (II, ii, 188). The court taste in art—play-writing, for instance—is loftily[16] indifferent to that of the vulgar—caviare to the general, who "are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumbshow and noise" (III, ii, 11-12), and prefer—and Hamlet always, when he desires to roil Polonius, calls him something "common" — "a jig or a tale of bawdry" (II, ii, 494). When Hamlet tells his uncle that "a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar" (IV, iii, 30-31), Claudius, horrified at this unseemly association of king and commoner, hastily interrupts him: "Where is Polonius?" he asks (IV, iii, 32), lest the court hear worse. Claudius, it is true, has more understanding of the multitude than anybody else, but even he complains on occasion that they don't think. They are

> "muddied,
> Thick and unwholesome in their thoughts and whispers."
> (IV, v, 78-79)

And nothing is more illuminating than Laertes' contemptuous dismissal of the mob when he is through with it.

The people instinctively resent this attitude. They have had one military hero, and they want another: Laertes, who is bluff and hearty and boisterous, if he will serve them.

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[16]"The censure of one judicious man [Hamlet?] must in your allowance o'erweigh a whole theater of others" who are but "barren spectators," Hamlet tells the players (III, ii, 25-27; 40). I have slightly modified the wording.

Hamlet is a dilletante; Horatio, a student; the king, a diplomat; Polonius, a backstairs politician; Cornelius and Voltimand, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, superior errand boys; Osric, a fop; and of the important men of the play, but two have anything of the Viking about them. But Laertes is too intent on his Berserker revenge to use—or abuse—his popularity, and Fortinbras is a foreigner. From the popular point of view the government has been ruined by foreign manners, foreign clothes, foreign tricks of speech; all men are mad in England, we read with some alarm, which means merely that all Danishmen, and only Danishmen, are sane. Even Hamlet, who can not stomach the national drunkenness, finds Osric too much for him. Yet these are the aristocrats the king must employ for the salvation of the nation.

It may be objected that the opposition which Shakespeare creates between the court and the people in *Hamlet* is nothing more than his usual practice, but I do not think so. There is no such breach between the aristocrats and the commoners in most of the other plays. They may quarrel, but they quarrel like Englishmen as in *Henry VI,* or like Romans as in *Julius Caesar,* or like Scotchmen as in *Macbeth.* They are all of a piece, so to speak, all nationals and have a common aim. But in *Hamlet* and in *Coriolanus,* which is much like *Hamlet,* Shakespeare pictures an aristocracy at complete variance with the national will, so that the court at Elsinore is like an alien island in the Danish sea.

III

Hamlet is a family tragedy. We may seem to have wandered far from our starting point, but I think not, for we can not understand that tragedy unless we understand the background against which we are to see it working out. The problem that confronts the Danish royal house is two-fold. On the one hand there is the problem of successfully governing what is, to all intents and purposes, a Danish empire, to hold which strains the resources of the state. On the other hand the king must satisfy conditions at home. In a crude figure, the king must ride two horses—the court and the

people, and at the same time steer his chariot down a tortuous and rocky road.

The foreign and domestic policy of the late king, like his character, was direct and simple. It is he who has beat the Norse and the Poles and the English. He has annexed two of these countries, or at least rendered them feudatories of his crown. As a consequence he has become the great folk-hero of the nation. As he was a general, so he was not a diplomat, and he concluded a treaty with Fortinbras of Norway in a chivalric, not to say romantic, manner worthy of a paladin in Ariosto, but quite impracticable as a rule of treaty-making. By this

> "seal'd compact,
> Well ratified by law and heraldry,"

(this is the Danish view of the matter), Fortinbras

> "Did forfeit, with his life, all those his lands
> Which he stood seized of, to the conqueror:
> Against the which, a moiety competent
> Was gaged by our king; which had return'd
> To the inheritance of Fortinbras,
> Had he been vanquisher; as, by the same covenant
> And carriage of the article design'd,
> His fell to Hamlet."
>
> (I, i, 86-95)

That is, they fought a duel and wagered their kingdoms, in effect, on the outcome. As romance this is magnificent (*Mais quel geste!* as Cyrano said) but as a piece of foreign policy, it is shortsighted and dangerous. Young Fortinbras may very properly feel aggrieved that his inheritance was lost to him in a duel, like a stake at cards, and one may imagine that Denmark will have to exert every resource to keep the conquest thus doubtfully won. In Shakespeare's day feudalism was already taking on an antique character, and Henry V, his favorite king, is a popular leader, not a feudal chief.

Hamlet has also fought and conquered Poland. Likewise he has invaded England after the same delightfully direct and

totally unconciliatory manner, much like Cromwell in Ireland. Now Denmark is, after all, provincial, as Shakespeare clearly shows, and though she shines in the world's eye, it is with delusive and temporary brilliance like Sweden under Charles XII. Having got her empire, the grand problem is to keep it, and so far as we know old Hamlet never solved this problem. Wise men, at the conclusion of the third foreign war (in whatever order they occurred), may well have dreaded the future. Conquests cost men and money; two months after Hamlet's death, that is to say, some time after these "successful" conquests, we find that the state must strain every effort merely to raise a force sufficient to overawe the disaffected Norse;

> "Why this same strict and most observant watch
> So nightly toils the subject of the land,
> And why such daily cast of brazen cannon,
> And foreign mart for implements of war;
> Why such impress of shipwrights, whose sore task
> Does not divide the Sunday from the week;
> What might be toward, that this sweaty haste
> Doth make the night joint-labourer with the day:
> Who is't that can inform me?"
>
> (I, i, 71-79)

asks young Marcellus, and wiser men than he may, with deeper and more alarming meaning, ask the same question. As a conqueror old Hamlet, like Charles XII, has overshot his mark and leaves behind him an exhausted state. The very "implements of war" have to be sought in "foreign mart"; the arsenal must be replenished; the navy is at a low state. Yet warfare was a comparatively simple matter, too.

How far the elder Hamlet would have gone we do not know, but if we are to judge him by his ghost, he would have gone till he dropped. For the ghost, who, the simple-minded sentinels believe, has returned to watch over his beloved Denmark, by a fine irony says not a word about Denmark, and exhibits not the slightest concern for her perilous positions—which, incidentally, he is mainly responsible for. His whole concern is, first of all, for himself; he begins by

complaining about the discomforts of purgatory (the existence of which, by the by, his son very much doubts), and explains that he would not thus have had his majesty discomforted, if he had not been

> "Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,
> Unhousel'd, disappointed, unaneled;
> No reckoning made, but sent to my account
> With all my imperfections on my head."
> (I, v, 76-79)

It is this, not the loss of his wife's love, that is

> "O, horrible! O, horrible! Most horrible!"
> (I, v, 80)

His redeeming feature throughout the scene is his love of Gertrude, for whom he makes both here and later a pathetic plea, but even this love—for we are all human—was, he explains,

> "of that dignity
> That it went hand in hand even with the vow
> I made to her in marriage,"
> (I, v, 48-50)

as though that were something remarkable in a husband. And what hurts his egotistic majesty is not alone that his wife deserted him, but that she deserted him for so inferior a specimen as Claudius, whom the ghost abuses in a frank but unchristian spirit as a "serpent," "that incestuous, that adulterate beast," "a wretch, whose natural gifts were poor To those of mine!" (I, v, 51-52). All the pangs of purgatory have not softened either the egotism or the complacency or the brutal directness of Hamlet's father. It is all of a piece that the king who slew Fortinbras single-handed, made England a

> "cicatrice raw and red
> After the Danish sword,"

and exhausted Denmark, complacently compares himself to "a radiant angel," to whom "lust"—the wife he adores—was once happily "linked," only to

"sate itself in a celestial bed
And prey on garbage."

(I, v, 56-57)

A low view of women is a family failing. Is it surprising that a man of these violent delights should come to violent ends?

Such was the former king of Denmark, a Scandinavian Hotspur, a fictional Henry V, a Berserker outmoded in a world in which "hangers" are called "carriages" and are "delicate" and "of a very liberal conceit," and the French rapier has replaced the battle axe (V, ii, passim). He has, like all of Shakespeare's characters, a redeeming humanity: the adoration of the populace, his love for his wife, the affection of his son, whom, I imagine, he did not well understand. Add to these a certain engaging simplicity and frankness, a magnificent and Jovian presence (note the "eye like Mars, to threaten and command"), and we have said all. A hero king, but a king, it is perfectly obvious, who, if he continues, will ruin Denmark which he regards, indeed, as so much personal property. Add that human lives mean as little to him as they did to Napoleon: young Hamlet, brought up in the traditions of his father, is sickened by it, and thinks of war as a

"fantasy and trick of fame"

in which

"twenty thousand men. . .
[May] go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot. . .
Which is not tomb enough and continent
To hide the slain."

(IV, iv, 60-65)

Incidentally, for we are none of us consistent, this same delicate-minded prince is the son of his father, for he sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths by a piece of trickery and finds for it the usual cold excuse of royalty:

> " 'Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes
> Between the pass and fell incensed points
> Of mighty opposites."
>
> (V, ii, 60-62)

His father (or his uncle) would applaud and appreciate the apothegm. But such a king as old Hamlet, I repeat, would ruin any country, and most of all, a poor and small one. Is not Denmark a prison, or at least one of the worst wards?

That this is not the traditional view of old king Hamlet is due, I think, to the fact that we are too easily led to accept young Hamlet's opinion of him. The prince is shrewd enough in other ways: he can manage a court intrigue, or overset one, with any man. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are putty in his hands; but like most dilletantes (and I do not use the word disrespectfully), he has little sense for *Realpolitik*, and could never in a thousand years understand that his father was, perhaps, not an ideal king in Denmark. Moreover he has been away at college during the last, and, we may assume, the more disastrous, or at any rate, more ominous, years of his father's reign, and he is much more interested in philosophy than he is in the foreign relations and the internal conditions of Denmark. Finally, he is a prejudiced witness as any child must be.

The wiser heads at Elsinore are growing more uneasy as the state is impoverished at the behest of an egotistic and bloody warlord.[17] Nor are the younger set much better pleased. Elsinore is a gloomy court, set in the midst of a camp where there is no amusement. Polite learning has to be sought in Wittenberg. When the players come from that fair city, they are such a rarity at Elsinore that the art-hungry Hamlet, with uncourtly precipitancy, demands a speech before the players can even utter their greetings. Laertes,

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[17]Does not Hamlet ironically address his uncle-king in what is apparently traditional court etiquette, in the one letter he writes him, as "high and mighty" (IV, vii, 43)? And that old Hamlet built an absolute power, using the king's divinity to strengthen it, we may gather from Claudius' actions, and from Marcellus' fear of striking at the ghost:

> "We do it wrong, being so majestical,
> To offer it the show of violence."
>
> (I, i, 143-144)

bored at court, returns to Paris. Hamlet would like to go back to school. There is, however, plenty of drill and soldiery, cannon are going off through the whole play, and drums are continually sounded. Does not Osric cut a poor figure in all this martial ardor? Does not Hamlet, for that matter, seem himself out of place? What is displeasing to the elder generation for economic, is displeasing to the younger generation for social, reasons.

Under these circumstances what occurs? That which is common in absolute monarchies, as the pages of Gibbon show, a palace revolution, carried out so neatly and so quietly that the populace is thoroughly deceived—to the disgust of the ghost, who complains of the very success of the plot:

> "so the whole ear of Denmark
> Is by a forged process of my death
> Rankly abused."
>
> (I, v, 36-38)

In plain terms, during the absence of his son, old Hamlet is quietly poisoned by his brother Claudius, who, a month later, has taken his sister-in-law to wife and made himself king of Denmark.

Now for a moment let us forget the fact of the murder. Let us also put aside for the moment our moral judgment on it. Let us suppose we know no more of Claudius' villainy than, let us say, does Osric. Is not the significant thing, not Hamlet's death, but the fact that, with the single exception of young Hamlet, there is not a single living being in Elsinore who fails to acquiesce in the irregular coronation of Claudius as natural and desirable, though the next "heir" is put aside, as he, and he alone, is careful to tell us? Claudius instantly commands the obedience of every person in the tragedy save the malcontents, Hamlet and Fortinbras. Polonius is his loyal servitor. Cornelius and Voltimand run his errands. Osric is his agent. Horatio and Marcellus announce themselves as "friends to this ground. And liegemen to the Dane" (I, i, 15). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern accept a dangerous and difficult task without a murmur, and in the course of that mission go to their deaths,

so far as we know, without even accusing the king of his apparent treachery, or trying to explain the forgery of the warrants, or protesting the execution. And—final tribute—the Danish populace toils night and day at the behest of one who Hamlet and the ghost would have us believe is a mere adulterate beast, and when they do riot, riot because Hamlet and not Claudius is at fault! How can we explain this, unless we understand what is clearly evident, that Hamlet's view of Claudius is merely Hamlet's view, and that his succession to the throne is by everyone else regarded as being for the general good of Denmark? And is it not also evident that Hamlet's succession to the throne, that is to say, the crowning of a green, hypochondriacal university student still in the adolescent stage of toying with suicide, would have spelled the ruin of Denmark? Such, at least, seems to me to be the common-sense view of the situation.

The coronation of Claudius, it is true, has inevitably awakened some sleeping dogs. The Norwegians,

> "Holding a weak supposal of our worth,"
> (I, ii, 18)

have bestirred themselves; young Fortinbras

> "hath not fail'd to pester us;"
> (I, ii, 22)

and the English have neglected tribute. How promptly and adroitly Claudius meets these problems I have already indicated. Overwhelming Norway with a show of force, he secures through his embassy a distinct diplomatic triumph; not only is Fortinbras prevented from warring against Denmark, his arms are turned against Poland, and furthermore Norway itself is to pay for the expedition! The enemies of Denmark thus waste their forces on each other.

Claudius must now steer clear of Poland and young Fortinbras. This he does by the time-honored device of diplomatic delay. If Poland complains, Claudius can point out

that he has never given permission for the passage of a Norse army through Danish soil; if Fortinbras complains, he can cite the declaration of sympathy uttered in open court and invent plausible excuses for delay. When at length Fortinbras invades the soil of Denmark, he clearly puts himself in the wrong; and what Claudius might have done with him, had he lived, we do not know, except that it would have been something adroit, skillful, and inexpensive. One can imagine old Hamlet in the midst of these events. One can also imagine young Hamlet, but one does not like to. In brief, Claudius is an expert and finished diplomat.

Shakespeare, whose opening scenes so well repay study, knew the value of first impressions as the beginnings of *Richard III, Antony and Cleopatra, Romeo and Juliet,* and *Macbeth* testify; and it is therefore significant that when we first see Claudius it is in his capacity of governor of the state, and on a political occasion. Before that time no one has spoken of him for good or bad; indeed, if there were no playbill, we should not know until we see him that such a person exists in the play. But when he does appear it is as the ruler of Denmark, and Shakespeare wants us to realize that he is every inch a king.[16]

The occasion is apparently the first public function at Elsinore since the death of Hamlet, and Claudius is to deliver a speech from the throne, as the end of the mourning period has come. *A priori,* we must suppose that curiosity is alert to observe how well he conducts himself. Now, as played on the stage, his speech is mere bombast, whereas in point of fact, his oration on this occasion as a sample of royal speech-making is superb: few kings can cover so many difficult topics so ably in what amounts by actual count to three hundred words. In language carefully chosen for the occasion, we are first told of the dynastic situation: old Hamlet is dead, and recognition is given his popularity:

[16]Claudius appears in eleven scenes: I, ii; II, ii; III, i; III, ii; III, iii; IV, i; IV, iii; IV, v; IV, vii; V, i; V, ii. As if to mark his royal function Shakespeare explicitly surrounds him with attendants in six of these scenes, provides him with courtiers in three more, and lets him enter alone only once (IV, v).

"it us befitted
To bear our hearts in grief and our whole kingdom
To be contracted in one brow of woe."
(I, ii, 2-4)

Then follows a graceful transition to that most delicate of topics, the recent marriage; and as we must remember that Claudius is addressing a court fond of Euphuistic phraseology, we see how cleverly he has worded his address, so that what seems to be mere windy rhetoric in our day is explicitly intended to tickle the ears of the courtiers, and to cover the error—if it was error—of haste:

"our sometime sister, now our queen
. . . . . .
Have we, as 'twere with a defeated joy,—
With an auspicious and a dropping eye,
With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,
In equal scale weighing delight and dole,—
Taken to wife."
(I, ii, 8-14)

The blank verse may halt for it, but this is not intended to please us; it is intended to please a court that commonly talks in the fashion caricatured in Osric. Lastly, under this head the king carefully hints that in the matter of the marriage he has yielded to public pressure:

"nor have we herein barr'd
Your better wisdoms, which have freely gone
With this affair along,"
(I, ii, 14-16)

and adds like the skillful speaker that he is,

"For all, our thanks."
(I, ii, 16)

Having thus exhibited his rhetorical prowess, Claudius proceeds to the international situation, in the handling of which he exhibits an equal mastery over clear and direct address. He recounts the situation in Norway, past and present, skillfully touches on the patriotic chord (every

heart vibrates to that iron string), and refers with equal adroitness to the glorious manner in which Norway was won:

> "Lost by his father, with all bonds of law,
> To our most valiant brother,"
> (I, ii, 24-25)

an allusion to the famous duel which everybody understands and, in public at least, applauds. Claudius then gives ringing utterance to the national determination to withstand the encroachments of Fortinbras, showing, incidentally, the fullest information as to the enemy plans:

> "the levies,
> The lists and full proportions, are all made
> Out of his subject,"
> (I, ii, 31-33)

information which heightens the general confidence in his abilities. Then he turns to the ambassadors (note the "good Cornelius"), gives them their dispatches and concludes with the admirable caution:

> "Giving to you no further personal power
> To business with the king more than the scope
> Of these delated articles allow,"
> (I, ii, 36-38)

which reads to me like a side hit at old Hamlet's diplomacy. The last line of his speech is more significant than it seems:

> "Farewell, and let your haste commend your duty."
> (I, ii, 39)

There is need of haste, of course, but why does the king stress "duty"?

Why do Cornelius and Voltimand together promptly answer:

> "In that and all things will we show our duty,"
> (I, ii, 40)

with again this curious insistence on "duty"? Why, for that matter, do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern give themselves so fully to the king's service?

> "we both obey,
> And here give up ourselves, in the full bent
> To lay our service freely at your feet,
> To be commanded."
>
> (II, ii, 29-32)

Why does Polonius remark three minutes after this speech:

> "I assure my good liege,
> I hold my duty as I hold my soul,
> Both to my God and to my gracious king?"
>
> (II, ii, 43-45)

And, more important, why does Shakespeare, as it were, go out of his way in the third scene of Act Three, and for seventeen lines play a fantasia on the same theme? It is just after Hamlet's play. The king has said that Hamlet must go to England because

> "The terms of our estate may not endure
> Hazard so near us as doth hourly grow
> Out of his lunacies,"
>
> (III, iii, 5-7)

a clear statement of the peril of Denmark. Whereupon the following replies are detailed at length:

> "*Guildenstern.* We will ourselves provide:
> Most holy and religious fear it is
> To keep those many many bodies safe
> That live and feed upon your majesty.
> *Rosencrantz.* The single and peculiar life is bound,
> With all the strength and armour of the mind,
> To keep itself from noyance; but much more
> That spirit upon whose weal depends and rests
> The lives of many. The cease of majesty
> Dies not alone; but like a gulf, doth draw
> What's near it with it: it is a massy wheel,
> Fix'd on the summit of the highest mount,
> To whose huge spokes ten thousand lesser things
> Are mortised and adjoin'd; which, when it falls,
> Each small annexment, petty consequence,
> Attends the boisterous ruin. Never alone
> Did the king sigh, but with a general groan."
>
> (III, iii, 7-23)

They are all alone. On the very lowest level, they are a trio of scoundrels amongst whom hyprocrisy would be laughable, and speech-making jejune. Yet we have these long interpolations, this treatise on majesty. And why, again, when Claudius has told Laertes of Hamlet's attempt on his, the king's life, does Laertes exclaim:

> "tell me
> Why you proceeded not against these feats,
> So crimeful and so capital in nature,
> As by your safety, wisdom, all things else,
> You mainly were stirr'd up,"
>
> (IV, vii, 5-9)

a strange and arresting speech when it is remembered that Laertes himself has just threatened the life of the king! What, in short, does all this insistence upon duty, upon the importance of the king's life, upon the crimeful and capital nature of attempts on that life—what does all this mean, if it does not mean that the policy of Claudius is the court policy, Claudius the only hope of Denmark, and the loss of Claudius a gulf that will draw what's near it with it? What does this mean in fine, except that Claudius makes an excellent king?

He is not only a diplomat and an administrator, he is more. Let us return again to the second scene of the tragedy. The speech-making is concluded, Cornelius and Voltimand having left after a hearty farewell. Thereupon, with an entire change of manner, Claudius turns to Laertes, whom he addresses with a hail-fellow-well-met air meant for Laertes, and Laertes alone, coupling with his question a flattering allusion to Polonius well calculated to win the heart of so filial a son. Laertes tells the king he wishes to return to France (whence *he* came to show his "duty"), and the courtly king, the father of his nation, turns to Polonius:

> "Have you your father's leave? What says Polonius?"
>
> (I, ii, 57)

and in his most gracious manner grants the boon.

When Laertes bursts in upon him in the fourth act, Claudius continues to treat him in the same paternal, the same skillful manner. He reminds Laertes of his relation towards his sovereign, waves the queen aside, and without a word of reproach, asks Laertes why he is incensed. The frightened queen, in the ensuing dialog, attempts to palliate the fact of Polonius' death, but Claudius, knowing the bluff, direct nature of the man, palliates nothing, tells him what he knows to be the truth, bids Laertes "demand his fill," waits patiently while the young man rages, puts him on the defensive with a word here and there, and when he is calmed, tells him gently:

> "Why, now you speak
> Like a good child and a true gentleman.
> That I am guiltless of your father's death,
> And am most sensibly in grief for it,
> It shall as level to your judgement pierce
> As day does to your eye."
>
> (IV, v, 144-149)

Then Ophelia comes in, mad, an interruption that in the hands of a less skilled person than Claudius would be fatal to his safety, but Claudius, with the utmost show of frankness, keeps Laertes subdued to his purpose. And in the following scene the same wonderful handling of men is continued: the bewildered Laertes, not knowing how it is his rage has so far been spent on air, ingenuously observes:

> "And so have I a noble father lost;
> A sister driven into desperate terms,
> Whose worth, if praises may go back again,
> Stood challenger on mount of all the age
> For her perfections: but my revenge will come."
>
> (IV, vii, 25-29)

A little later the news of Ophelia's death is suddenly brought by the queen, but so cleverly has Claudius moulded him that his old-time rage is conquered:

> "Adieu, my lord:
> I have a speech of fire that fain would blaze,
> But that this folly douts it."
>
> (IV, vii, 190-192)

The saddened but triumphant king follows him:

> "Let's follow, Gertrude:
> How much I had to do to calm his rage!"
> (IV, vii, 192-193)

But his rage is permanently calmed, and in a most skillful fashion, by a master, an adroit master, of men.

There is not space to study the king's relation to other characters: to Polonius, for instance, for whom his manner is one of affectionate and respectful familiarity; to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whom he wins on the first trial:

> "Both your majesties
> Might, by the sovereign power you have of us,
> Put your dread pleasures more into command
> Than to entreaty,"
> (II, ii, 26-29)

a speech which again I read as a backward glance at old Hamlet's imperious manner. Let us turn to the master test, the king's treatment of young Hamlet himself.

It is again necessary to return to the second scene of Act One. The king has just granted Laertes his request. As if to encourage Hamlet by the example of Laertes, he turns to his nephew and jocularly asks him:

> "How is it that the clouds still hang on you?"
> (I, ii, 66)

an initial mistake, showing that he has misjudged Hamlet's mood. But the king corrects his error. After Hamlet has answered his mother:

> "I have that within which passeth show;
> These but the trappings and the suits of woe,"
> (I, ii, 85-86)

the king, having had time to collect his resources, speaks to Hamlet, it seems to me, as artfully as he had addressed Laertes or the general court. He begins in his most winning manner by an exquisite piece of flattery for Hamlet's good taste and filial sorrow:

" 'Tis sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet,
To give these mourning duties to your father."
(I, ii, 87-88)

He goes on gently to point out that

"to persevere
In obstinate condolement is a course
Of impious stubbornness,"
(I, ii, 92-94)

and with a home thrust tells him it shows

"An understanding simple and unschooled."
(I, ii, 97)

In any case unprevailing woe is "a fault to nature" (and if this were said by anybody else we would without comment applaud its wisdom), but especially is it a fault in Hamlet who should

"think of us
As of a father: for let the world take note,
You are the most immediate to our throne,
And with no less nobility of love
Than that which dearest father bears his son
Do I impart toward you,"
(I, ii, 107-112)

and the whole ends with an appeal to Hamlet to remain at court and learn the business of being a king.

Now it is objected to this speech, as to the queen's before it, that it is a tissue of maladroit commonplaces. As for the commonplaces Hamlet's admired soliloquy on suicide is no less platitudinous. It is not the thought but the poetic glamor of

"To be, or not to be: that is the question"
(III, i, 56)

which makes it great. If it is a profound thought that

"in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,"
(III, i, 66-67)

it is equally profound that

> "all that lives must die,
> Passing through nature to eternity,"
> (I, ii, 72-73)

or that

> "your father lost a father,
> That father lost, lost his, and the survivor bound
> In filial obligation for some term
> To do obsequious sorrow."
> (I, ii, 89-92)

They all hang by the same thread. It is all a matter of values, of the point of view. To the tender-minded the queen's statement is a coarse and untactful platitude, well calculated to draw Hamlet's saddened and ironical reply:

> "Ay, madam, it is common."
> (I, ii, 74)

To the tough-minded the king's statement is a bracing and healthful tonic. When that is said, all is said: one statement is as tactful as another; and for the practical business of statesmanship, which is just now Hamlet's purpose in the world, a cosmic view of the universe will never, never do. Each speaks out of his nature; and I do not see how even an innocent uncle could say anything less, or anything more, than Claudius says, or say it more skillfully. To remind Hamlet that he is a man and a brother and that he has his work in the world; to meet him on his own ground and argue the case philosophically; to tell him that he is nearest and dearest to the king's throne,

> "the cheer and comfort of our eye,
> Our chiefest courtier, cousin and our son"
> (I, ii, 116-117)

—what more can one expect? Claudius tactfully extends the olive branch, puts Hamlet on the defensive as he later does Laertes, keeps him there through most of the play;

and to the whole court, to Claudius himself, who long does not know that Hamlet knows his secret, Hamlet's persistent ill-treatment of his uncle is thereafter nothing short of a public calamity of which Claudius seems to everybody entirely guiltless.

When Hamlet goes "mad," Claudius does everything that a reasonable and kindly man could be expected under such circumstances to do; he calls Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to attend his nephew; consents to hear his play; and treats him throughout the greater part of the tragedy with amazing patience and kindness. And granted that his motives are of the basest, granted that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are spies, that the king is cloaking an ulterior purpose with a mask of courtesy, my point is still that the king's methods are admirably calculated for the man he is dealing with, leaving Hamlet no opening to pick a quarrel, no occasion for complaint; forcing him back upon his purpose, making him doubt the ghost, and offering for Hamlet's attack but one moment of weakness—that at the play which catches the king off his guard. In short, skillfully as he handles Laertes, even more skillfully does he deal with Hamlet to the very end—even in the duel scene with its ironic courtesies and innuendoes; and Claudius, far from proving a fool and a beast, is remarkable above everything else for his treatment of those about him.

Nor is this all. As he is careful to draw the court around him, winning the allegiance of each man by special and flattering treatment, picking his agents, it seems to me, with extraordinary skill,[19] offering to Hamlet (except for one moment of indecision) a polished and unassailable front, Claudius is equally careful to please and flatter the multitude. He possesses, or he apes, the vices of a popular king, the *camaraderie* of the *bon homme* beloved of the multitude. He takes care to drink deep, or to appear to:

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[19]On the stage today the process of making the king stupid is continued to his subordinates, so that this statement seems fanciful. But who would be better for their posts than Hamlet's school fellows, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? Who will better disarm Hamlet's suspicions than the fop, Osric? What embassy could prove more successful than that of Voltimand and Cornelius?

"No jocund health that Denmark drinks today,
But the great cannon to the clouds shall tell,
And the king's rouse the heavens shall bruit again,
Re-speaking earthly thunder,"
(I, ii, 125-128)

advertising each potion to the populace. He keeps up the national dances and

"the swaggering up-spring reels."
(I, iv, 9)

He realizes the value of luxury and display in fixing a feeling of security in the popular mind; and we see him throw into his cup

"an union....
Richer than that which four successive kings
In Denmark's crown have worn,"
(V, ii, 264-266)

as Claudius is careful to tell us and the public.[20] This looks like rank extravagance, but small states like to think of themselves expansively. And with equal insight Claudius keeps up, though he does not use, the army. He refers to the late hero-king in admiring terms, though he has no intention of imitating his policy; and he fires off cannon, bids the kettledrums play, the trumpets sound, and the attendants parade because all this is part of his business as king of the Danes, part of good policy, and the source of popular confidence and complacency. He clings to Polonius as the representative of the old regime, and upon the death of Polonius cries out in alarm,

"O, come away!
My soul is full of discord and dismay,"
(IV, i, 44-45)

immediately puts Hamlet under arrest, and sets to work to counteract the effects of an accident so contrary to his policy:

[20]That this offers Claudius an opportunity to poison the drink is an acting device that does not affect the argument.

> "this vile deed
> We must, with all our majesty and skill,
> Both countenance and excuse."
>
> (IV, i, 30-32)

> "we'll call up our wisest friends;
> And let them know, both what we mean to do,
> And what's untimely done....
> Whose whisper o'er the world's diameter
> As level as the cannon to his blank
> Transports his poison'd shot, may miss our name
> And hit the woundless air."
>
> (IV, i, 38-44)

He knows that the people

> "wants not buzzers to infect [Laertes'] ear
> With pestilent speeches of his father's death;
> Wherein necessity, of matter beggar'd,
> Will nothing stick our person to arraign
> In ear and ear."
>
> (IV, v, 87-91)

It is not the fault of Claudius that Polonius is killed; it is part of his profound policy to keep Polonius near the throne and to link Hamlet to Polonius' family; and it is a mark of the wisdom of his policy that, Polonius murdered, things go to pieces at Elsinore.

Now it may be said that all this is perhaps very true, but that Claudius remains a villain, a smiling hypocrite of extraordinary powers—perhaps the most extraordinary hypocrite in Shakespeare—but still a hypocrite. He is still a murderer. But even a hypocritical Claudius is better than a stuffed bogeyman, and the actor who will present Claudius as an intelligent hyprocrite will make vast strides forward in interpreting and strengthening the play. We feel that Claudius is a villain of monstrous proportions largely because of Hamlet's opinion of him, and as we have hitherto put that opinion aside, it is time to examine it and to determine how far we are justified in accepting Hamlet's opinion of his uncle as our opinion.

IV

Hamlet's denunciations of his uncle are those of the ghost, but we can as conveniently confine ourselves to the one as to the other.[21] They, and they alone, find Claudius to be "an incestuous and adulterate beast," "incarnate lewdness," "slave's offal," "a smiling, damned villain"—for these are the expressions they use concerning him. Stripped of all their abusive language (and Hamlet is the only foul-mouthed person in the play), we find the charges against Claudius amount to these:

(1) He is ill-looking.

(2) He is a coarse, sensual man who (a) drinks too much and (b) leads a filthy life with the queen.

(3) He has robbed young Hamlet of his crown.

(4) He is at fault in his marriage with Gertrude in that (a) he seduced the queen; (b) he hurried her into marriage; (c) he committed incest with her.

(5) He is a murderer who has (a) killed his brother and (b) attempted the assassination of Hamlet.

It is my contention that of these points in the indictment of Claudius some are not true; some require a considerable modification of Hamlet's statements; and some are open to other explanations than the simple but totally unsatisfactory one that Claudius is a "satyr" who does his beastliness out of mere love of evil. Let us consider the indictment in the order in which I have presented it.

(1) *Claudius is ill-looking.* We have no indication that Claudius is ill-looking except Hamlet's unsupported statements that he is a "bloat king," a "satyr," "a mildew'd ear." In his denunciation of Gertrude's conduct Hamlet draws a carefully particularized portrait of his father which he contrasts with that of his uncle, but he is totally unable to name a single physical deformity in Claudius, and takes refuge in general abuse (III, iv.). On the other hand the general impression we have of Claudius is that of a stately and commanding figure, as ancestrally he should be. When he confronts Laertes and the mob, he tells Gertrude:

[21] This statement does not hold for the charge of incest. See below, p. 89 ff.

> "Do not fear [for] our person:
> There's such divinity doth hedge a king,
> That treason can but peep to what it would,".
> (IV, v, 119-121)

a silly performance, did not Claudius possess a commanding port and embody something of kingly divinity. Lastly, Claudius retains the devoted love of Gertrude throughout the play, even after Hamlet's denunciation of him, for we find her protecting Claudius in the scene with Laertes; and it is difficult to think of Hamlet's mother linked to the ape and beast that Hamlet's lurid curses picture for us. For lack of evidence this charge must be thrown out of court.

(2) *Claudius is a coarse, sensual man who* (*a*) *drinks too much and* (*b*) *leads a filthy life with the queen.* Let us consider the second charge under its two heads. (a) Drunkenness is, as we know, a national trait; and in bringing this charge Hamlet would also seem to be condemning his father and his grandfather before him. But however this may be the nation is not so drunken as Hamlet supposes—has, indeed, singular fits of sobriety, since throughout five acts of Shakespeare's longest tragedy, we do not see a single drunken man. Claudius, on every occasion, (how unlike Lepidus in *Antony and Cleopatra!*) is in full possession of his faculties. We know of Claudius's drinking on two occasions only: (1) when he carouses in honor of Hamlet's decision to remain at Elsinore; (2) during the duel between Hamlet and Laertes. Both of these are public occasions, when it is Claudius' policy to flatter the people; and so he drinks and dances. Nowhere in the play do we see, or hear of, Claudius when he thinks or acts or talks like a drunken man. This charge can not be substantiated.

(b) Hamlet tells us also that Claudius is an arrant sensualist, and his picture of Claudius in the queen's bed is of a sort to turn the stomach. But what can Hamlet know of the intimacies of the conjugal chamber? We must fall back on the explanation that Claudius' general character justifies Hamlet's imaginative description. Unfortunately for Hamlet, no one else in the play finds Claudius unchaste. There is no gossip about the sensuality of his relations with

Gertrude, such as there is about the sensuality of Antony's relations with Cleopatra. We have no account of other women he has debauched, as we have a list of Macbeth's villainies. We have no pregnant comment in this play such as Ulysses makes of Cressida. There is no scene like that between Charmian and the Soothsayer, to illumine as by a lightning flash the licentiousness of the Danish court. And the ruler of that court throughout the play never utters an unchaste thought or a licentious jest. On the contrary his relations with Gertrude, his attitude toward Ophelia, are marked by the strictest propriety. He does not kiss his wife, he does not fondle her, he does not pinch her cheek, he does not paddle in her neck, he does not do any of the things that Hamlet would have us believe are second nature with him. He is not, in short, so far as we can determine, a "satyr," a "beast," or any other of the elaborate bits of abuse which Hamlet uses.

Hamlet, on the other hand, is filthy-minded.[21a] His speeches to his mother, even by the Elizabethan standard, are exaggerated, gross and insulting. Hamlet forces Guildenstern to a dirty jest. Hamlet abuses the innocent Ophelia in the language of the gutter. Hamlet makes obscene jokes in the play-scene. Though we may excuse all this as acting or because it springs from the repression of his nature, we must admit, I think, that Hamlet, mad or sane, acting or natural, is more ready to bring charges of this kind than to sustain them, and that the only ground for supposing that Claudius is sensual must be his hasty marriage with Gertrude—to be examined later.

These counts aside, there remains the matter of Claudius' coarseness. Coarseness, however, is a matter of definition. Hamlet wants to wear mourning all his life; Claudius tells him to take it off and go to work. Hamlet can not stand anything that is not caviare to the multitude; the common people want a jig or a tale of bawdry. Hamlet wonders how the grave-diggers can so stultify their feelings as

[21a] Of course part of the obscenity is due to the stage humor of Hamlet's "madness." He warns us, too, that he is going to "speak daggers" to his mother.

to sing; the first clown takes a professional pride in knowing when bodies will rot. Which of these attitudes is the wiser? For the purposes of state Hamlet's emotional metaphysics is as wrong as Claudius' murder. Hamlet is tender-minded, Claudius is tough-minded. Hamlet anticipates Schopenhauer; Claudius is a precursor of Benjamin Franklin. Romanticist and realist, idealist and practical man, dreamer and man of affairs—the opposition is eternal, and the tragedy consists in part in this very fact. To say that Claudius is "coarse" is, therefore, merely to say that he is not Hamlet—fire and water are not more opposite. Is not this, then, all that Hamlet's complaints, or the complaints we make for him under this head, amount to in the end?

(3) *Claudius has robbed young Hamlet of his crown.* It is not clear how seriously Hamlet thinks of Claudius as one who has robbed him of his crown, for, as we have seen, he cares little for matters of state, and it is not until late in the play that he makes a positive statement. After his interview with the ghost, he says the time is out of joint and he must set it right; this he utters aloud for the benefit of his two friends (I, v, 189-190); and it is possible he means them to think of him as one robbed of his crown. However this may be, the most natural explanation of Hamlet's madness that Rosencrantz can think of, and the one on which he hopes Hamlet will talk freely in order to gain Rosencrantz as a partisan, is the question of the crown; and it is noticeable that Hamlet neither affirms nor denies Rosencrantz' statement. Indeed, he has apparently reflected on the usefulness of such a subterfuge, for we find him telling Rosencrantz in another scene:

> "Sir, I lack advancement,"
>
> (III, ii, 331)

and after Rosencrantz has tried to egg him on by by the ordinary device of a denial, there comes the scene with the recorders. Hamlet tells Gertrude that Claudius stole the

crown, but he does not say or imply that it was stolen from him, Hamlet. He means, I take it, that the coronation of his uncle was irregular:

> "A murderer and a villain;
> A slave that is not twentieth part the tithe
> Of your precedent lord; a vice of kings;
> A cutpurse of the empire and the rule,
> That from a shelf the precious diadem stole
> And put it in his pocket!"
>
> (III, iv, 96-101)

He tells Horatio, with whom he is always frank and honest, that Claudius

> "Popp'd in between the election and my hopes;"
>
> (V, ii, 65)

but it is in the very last conversation they have alone, and in the second scene of the last act, and nothing comes of it.

Now Hamlet, as Werder points out, is eager to find some pretext for killing Claudius, and it is largely his inability to find one that makes him appear weak-willed and indecisive. If there were any possibility of using the robbery charge as a rallying cry, we should, I think, find Hamlet employing it. But he does not use it. He toys with the idea through four acts, trying it out, so to speak, and finding it impracticable. It would seem therefore that Hamlet himself, for the most part, regards the robbery argument as thin. But after Claudius has played into his hands with his scheme for assassinating the prince, after Hamlet has documentary proof of that plot, and especially after Laertes' uprising, Hamlet seems to find the idea pragmatically valuable and so, possibly with some design of later developing the argument, he sketches for Horatio a kind of campaign platform (and later he directs Horatio how this is to be used: "tell my story right"), and includes the robbery argument (V, ii, 63-70). But the end comes unexpectedly as is usual with Shakespeare, whose characters seldom seem quite ready to die, and we do not know what Hamlet's method of attack would have been.

The sole right that Hamlet can have to the crown of Denmark is that he is the son of the late king. By insisting that Claudius has not been properly elected, he can seem to strengthen his case, but that argument is clearly beside the point. Now Denmark is not a hereditary monarchy, or at least was not before Claudius' time. Hamlet tells us two or three times it is an elective monarchy, and himself votes for Fortinbras just before he dies. Hence, Hamlet's hereditary right is, by his own argument, swept away. The only remaining plea is that, since Claudius failed to go through the form of an election, the claims of Hamlet as a candidate have not been properly considered. This is the statement he makes to Horatio: Claudius has ruined his "hopes." But the rights of a candidate for the presidency of the United States do not give him any right to the presidency, and no more do Hamlet's wrongs as a possible candidate for the Danish crown entitle him to be king in Elsinore.

Hamlet's inability to make out a good case for the crown is again the result, it seems to me, of Claudius' extraordinary shrewdness. As I say, Claudius was apparently never "elected" to the crown. Why not? Possibly upon the sudden death of old Hamlet, and in the serious condition of affairs, an election was inadvisable. Possibly the marriage in some way satisfied the law.[22] Possibly Claudius simply mounted the throne. But at any rate, Claudius could be "elected" whenever he chose to be, Hamlet or no Hamlet; there is no doubt of it, for the court unanimously approve of him and of the marriage (he has "freely" consulted their "better wisdoms" (I, ii, 15) in the matter). Yet, when it would be so easy to do so, he does not seem in the least uneasy because he has not been legally elected king. Why does he not strengthen his position and shut Hamlet's mouth?

Claudius, with the tacit consent of the court, is apparently trying to change Denmark from an elective to a hereditary

[22]Note that Gertrude is the "imperial jointress" of the state (I, ii, 9).

monarchy with a view to strengthening the state.[23] With that end in view he publicly announces that Hamlet is his heir. Hamlet, as Rosencrantz points out, can not complain. Popular sentiment is satisfied. If Hamlet argues for the elective system, Claudius is sure to be chosen.[24] If he argues that under the hereditary system he, and not Claudius, should rule, he becomes a law-breaker like his uncle. But under the hereditary system Hamlet is absolutely sure of his crown. He is more nearly certain of it than he was under his father. That is why he is baffled in his struggle with Claudius, and that is why the robbery argument is too thin for serious use. Claudius is like a glassy wall up which Hamlet struggles to climb without footing.

(4) *Claudius is at fault in his marriage with Gertrude in that* (*a*) *he seduced the queen;* (*b*) *he hurried her into marriage;* (*c*) *he committed incest with her.* Hamlet brings more cogent charges against his uncle. Claudius, he says, has "whored" his mother, married her precipitately, and lives in incest with her.

It is obvious that much will depend upon the sincerity of the attachment between Gertrude and Claudius. If their love has in it something fine and good, it will prove like all great passions to have extenuation in it, or at any rate, the spectator will be more ready to pity than to condemn. If, as Hamlet claims, their attachment is on the one hand a low, dirty intrigue, and on the other, a sensual sty, we may as well give up the case as hopeless.

Professor Kittredge would have us believe that we are dealing with a case of guilty passion. The tragedy of the house of Hamlet springs, he says, out of the fatal love of Gertrude and Claudius. It is for her that Claudius has murdered his brother. It is she and not the crown he has

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[23]Shakespeare could hardly do otherwise. The one elective monarchy he knew was Poland—a by-word for disorderly government. The Holy Roman Empire was the enemy of England. Hence, the change to a more stable government would naturally take the direction of the hereditary form. That is why, among other reasons, Claudius is so insistent on the divine right of kings. See on Poland the chapters from Fynes Moryson's Itinerary, ed. by Charles Hughes, entitled *Shakespeare's Europe*, especially p. 77. London, 1903. Note the hatred for "Poperie."

[24]It is almost superfluous to say that the people are to have no voice in the election—something they complain of in the Laertes rebellion.

aimed at, and Professor Kittredge points for proof to the ascending climax in Claudius' soliloquy:

> "those effects for which I did the murder,
> My crown, mine own ambition and my queen."
> (III, iii, 54-55)

If we did not know how the marriage came about, we should agree, I think, that Gertrude and Claudius (except to Hamlet) are, for the greater part of the play, the picture of a devoted and self-respecting couple. The genuine courtesy of the king's public references to his wife, the deference of each to the other, notable in their first interview with Guildenstern and Rosencrantz (II, ii), the concern of the queen in the play scene:

> "How fares my lord?"
> (III, ii, 261)

a prelude to her plaintive

> "O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain!"
> (III, iv, 156)

and above all the way the two cling to each other amid their sea of troubles, from the perplexity of the king's

> "O Gertrude, Gertrude,"
> (IV, v, 74)

to the queen's anxious attempt to save her husband from Laertes:

> "But not by him!"—
> (IV, v, 125)

all these are unmistakable, and are so many direct denials to Hamlet's furious and unseemly abuse. And this passion seems at one time to rise to the height of great pathos when, in the last scene, the helpless king cries out with the simplicity of all high tragedy:

> "It is the poison'd cup; it is too late."
> (V, ii, 284)

At any rate the relation between the two is not the nasty affair of too much of Hamlet's thinking—as, indeed, it would be superfluous to point out, were we not all hypnotized by the modern versions of the play.

But I do not think we can adopt the Kittredge explanation unreservedly. Human motives are very mixed, and life, as George Moore says, never comes twice in the same way. And it seems to me that while the sincerity and depth of the queen's attachment to Claudius is indubitable, surviving as it does the most fearful sorrows to sink at last, strangely enough, in a storm of accident and revelation in which Gertrude alone never finds out the truth,[25] the attachment of Claudius to Gertrude is another matter. I should say that his love has sincerity, but no depth. For in the lines to which Professor Kittredge refers, though they may, indeed, rise to a climax on "queen"—a debatable point—Claudius yet enumerates the effects of the murder entirely in their political aspects:

> "My crown, mine own ambition and my queen,"

that is, my office, my desire of attaining (or retaining) it, and my securest hold upon that office. And after Claudius has uttered the tragic cry I have quoted; after he knows the queen is surely dying, he yet watches the duel!

> "I do not think't,"
>
> (V, ii, 286)

he says in answer to Laertes' boast, and when Hamlet wounds Laertes, he directs the attendants to

> "Part them; they are incensed."
>
> (V, ii, 294)

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[25]The queen cries out:

> "No, no, the drink, the drink,—O my dear Hamlet,—
> The drink, the drink! I am poisoned!"
>
> (V, ii, 301-302)

Unless she is thinking of her first husband—something I very much doubt—this reads to me as though, having convinced herself in the closet scene that Hamlet is mad, she now reproaches Hamlet with poisoning her. Has he not attempted the life of the king? Driven his beloved mad, and killed her? At any rate, it is significant that she never suspects Claudius.

Seven lines after "the Queen falls," he is cool-witted enough to try to conceal what has happened:

> "She swounds to see them bleed."
>
> (V, ii, 299)

And when Hamlet has stabbed him, his last thought is of his own life:

> "O, yet defend me, friends; I am but hurt."
>
> (V, ii, 316)

His whole interest is in the outcome of the plot, not in Gertrude. In contrast to the single-hearted devotion of the queen, is this tragic passion?

When Antony is (falsely) informed of Cleopatra's death, he drops all earthly concerns:

> "Unarm, Eros, the long day's task is done,
> And we must sleep...
> I will o'ertake thee, Cleopatra, and
> Weep for my pardon."

When Othello has, like Claudius, killed the thing he loved, we read,

> "I kiss'd thee ere I kill'd thee; no way but this,
> Killing myself to die upon a kiss."

When Romeo sees Juliet dead:

> "O, true apothecary;
> Thy drugs are quick.—Thus with a kiss I die."

Such a man as Macbeth can say upon the news of his wife's death:

> "I 'gin to be a-weary of the sun,
> And wish the estate o' the world were now undone."

Even Troilus has a far-off glimmer of this magic:

"O Cressid! O false Cressid! false, false, false!
Let all untruths stand by thy stained name,
And they seem glorious."

The noise and clamor of the world's affairs sound as loudly in all these plays, and the end of all but one is as rapid as that of *Hamlet*; but in each case there is no doubt that we are dealing with tragic passion, whereas Claudius utters no such cry. His thought is of himself and of his throne. The truth to nature and the poignancy of

"It is the poison'd cup; it is too late"

arise, indeed, from the very fact that a supremely skillful plotter here is foiled. He watches the duel that may yet leave him secure upon his throne. He could never understand Antony:

"Kingdoms are clay; our dungy earth alike
Feeds beast as man: the nobleness of life
Is, to do thus, when such a mutual pair,
And such a twain can do't."

Instead of the world well lost, his eye is fixed upon Denmark:

"O, yet defend me, friends; I am but hurt."

What are we to make of him? Is it but another proof that Claudius is a conscienceless villain? Has Hamlet's "good mother" wasted her soul's affection on a scoundrel and a cad? Have the affections of the court been fixed upon a contemptible and petty desperado? Is Hamlet, after all, right, and is every one else (including Professor Kittredge) mad? I do not think so.

The passion of Gertrude is, indeed, tragic passion—intense, fatal, overwhelming; but the same is not true of Claudius. Neither does his apparent unconcern at the queen's death mean that he is a mere scoundrel. Claudius gives Gertrude all that he can. He has for her a genuine affection. It is even love. But it is not passion; and in him "the quick, unreasoning heart" is strictly subordinated to

"the cool and reasoning brain." There are degrees in affection; Cupid but claps some on the shoulder; and men have died, as that wise young woman, Rosalind, says, from time to time and worms have eaten them, but not for love. Claudius loves Gertrude, but only as his nature permits him, and he is incapable of feeling a grand passion.

The motives for the marriage are mixed—passion on Gertrude's part, affection on the part of Claudius, and not a little policy. Their love was guilty in its beginning, and it has led to crime: to adultery before old Hamlet's death, and to the murder of old Hamlet. In the first instance both are clearly guilty, though Gertrude's adoration for Claudius tends to humanize her and, in dramatic terms, to make her "sympathetic." In the second count Claudius alone is guilty. Gertrude's passion is her tragic fault; but the murder of his brother is the tragic fault of Claudius, and back of the love-affair, back of the murder, was ambition. They are not, it is clear, fellow-conspirators like Macbeth and Lady Macbeth; they are not light-o'-loves likes Cressida and Troilus; they are not splendid lovers like Cleopatra and Antony.

Because the love of Gertrude for Claudius is in *Hamlet* the beginning of evil, people jump, it is true, to the conclusion that Gertrude, in addition to abandoning her first husband, was accessory to his murder. This conviction is strengthened by the play-scene as that is usually staged; for modern versions gratuitously make the Player-Queen beckon Lucianus, the poisoner, to his task. There is absolutely no justification in Shakespeare for the pantomime thus enacted. The text is clear. The Player-Queen goes out at

> "And never come mischance between us twain!"
> (III, ii, 223)

Lucianus enters alone, speaks, but makes no reference to the Player-Queen, and poisons the Player-King. At this point the play is interrupted but the dumb-show tells all; we read

> "The Queen returns; finds the King dead, and makes passionate action. The Poisoner, with some two or three Mutes, comes in again, seeming to lament with her. The dead body is carried away. The Poisoner wooes the Queen with gifts; she seems loath and unwilling awhile, but in the end accepts his love."

Obviously there is not the slightest excuse for making the Player-Queen a murderess, but we are so occupied with making Claudius and Gertrude monsters of wickedness that we change the very image which Hamlet (and Shakespeare) wrought! For if Hamlet believes that his mother is a murderess, and if he has "doctored" *The Murder of Gonzago* so that it shall picture the assassination of Hamlet as accurately as possible, he has made a curious botch of it; and if he has merely chosen that play as coming near to the assassination, without actually picturing the deed in all its circumstances, he has been clumsy, to say the least. We must suppose that *The Murder of Gonzago* faithfully relates the deed as it was done; else the king can not be frightened with false fire.

There is not a scintilla of evidence to show that Gertrude is a murderess. The ghost does not make such a charge. His complaint, so far as Gertrude is concerned, is that her affections have turned to so poor a thing as Claudius. Nor does Hamlet make the charge. He says, it is true, at the opening of the closet scene,

> "A bloody deed! almost as bad, good mother,
> As kill a king, and marry with his brother,"
> (III, iv, 28-29)

but Gertrude's astonishment is so genuine and unforced that the prince never reverts to this topic, despite the fact that he is desperately in need of the evidence he might wring from the frightened woman,—if he did not clearly perceive that there is no evidence to wring. Not only is Gertrude no murderess; there is not a scintilla of evidence to show that she knows that old Hamlet was murdered, much less that Claudius killed him. Royal conspirators like Macbeth

and Lady Macbeth continually turn back to *their* common crimes as cardinal points in their policy, but the only point to which Gertrude and Claudius together revert is their love-relationship. They never speak of their mutual crime —meaning the murder—for the sufficient reason that the guilt of that murder is sole and singular. If Shakespeare meant to paint another pair of royal assassins, he has been singularly clumsy about it.

In fine, the reason for the ghost's warning,

> "howsoever thou pursuest this act,
> Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
> Against thy mother aught: leave her to heaven,"
> (I, v, 84-86)

is that Hamlet may not, that the audience may not, jump to the conclusion that Gertrude is an accomplice in the killing. The ghost's language indicates, so to speak, the theological nature of her fault; it is a sin rather than a crime; the sin of adultery, not the crime of murder. This is what Gertrude acknowledges it to be:

> "To my sick soul, as sin's true nature is,"[26]
> (IV, v, 17)

she says, for her fault is against the ecclesiastical, more strongly than against the civil, code. Hence she is to be left "to heaven" and to

> "those thorns that in her bosom lodge,
> To prick and sting her,"
> (I, v, 87-88)

whereas Claudius, being of the world, is to be punished of the world:

> "*Revenge* his foul and most unnatural murder,"
> (I, v, 25)

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[26]Claudius never speaks of the murder as a "sin" but as a "fault," an "offense," just as Macbeth never uses "sin" to designate the murder of Duncan.

says the ghost, and Hamlet, seeing his uncle at prayer, reasons not improperly:

> ". . . Am I then revenged,
> To take him in the purging of his soul,
> When he is fit and season'd for his passage?
> No.
> When he is...
> ...about some act
> That has no relish of salvation in't;
> Then trip him up, that his heels may kick at heaven
> And that his soul may be as damn'd and black
> As hell, whereto it goes,"
> (III, iii, 84-95)

whereas, ten minutes later, he can tell his mother:

> "Confess yourself to heaven;
> Repent what's past, avoid what is to come."
> (III, iv, 149-150)

The charge that Claudius "whored" Hamlet's mother is true only in the sense of guilty love, not in the sense that he has also made of her a criminal. This love is deeper on Gertrude's part than on that of Claudius, and has accordingly the extenuation of great passion, as Hamlet feels himself:

> "That monster, custom, who all sense doth eat,
> Of habits devil, is angel yet in this,
> That to the use of actions fair and good
> He likewise gives a frock or livery,
> That aptly is put on. Refrain tonight,
> And that shall lend a kind of easiness
> To the next abstinence; and the next more easy;
> *For use almost can change the stamp of nature.*"
> (III, iv, 161-168)

Hamlet also complains of the haste of his mother's marriage. Even before he knows of the murder, his sense of propriety has been deeply wounded:

"within a month;
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing of her galled eyes,
She married,"
(I, ii, 153-156)

and he sadly—if vaguely—concludes,

"It is not, nor it cannot come to good."
(I, ii, 158)

If Claudius is the shrewd and crafty plotter that, on the lowest plane, he seems to be, it looks as if here he had failed. Why should he arouse Hamlet's suspicions when a little delay would serve to allay them? One can not but be struck by the apparent foolhardiness of the king's behavior. He seems with brazen effrontery to court destruction and invite scandal, as Gertrude tells us:

"I doubt it is no other but the main;
His father's death and our o'erhasty marriage."
(II, ii, 56-57)

Even the taciturn Horatio makes one of his few comments on public affairs by dryly observing of the marriage and the funeral,

"Indeed, my lord, it follow'd hard upon."
(I, ii, 179)

A tyro in deceit (it would seem) could manage to weep less than Gertrude, or to wait longer than Claudius. An amateur in conspiracy would postpone the wedding at least until a decent interval had elapsed and murmur had died down.

That is precisely what an amateur would do, and precisely why Claudius does not do it. For it is to be remarked that all the comment about the hasty marriage comes at the beginning of the play. Of all the pretexts Hamlet might find for quarreling with his uncle, the hasty marriage, implying as it does bad faith at the best and treachery at the worst, would seem to be the most plausible; Gertrude fears gossip about it; and yet Hamlet not only does not use it, but when,

at the conclusion of the piece, he summarizes for Horatio his grievances against his uncle, the theme of the hasty marriage is slurred over in his catalog!

> "Does it not, think'st thee, stand me now upon—
> He that hath kill'd my king, and whored my mother;
> Popp'd in between the election and my hopes;
> Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
> And with such cozenage—is't not perfect conscience,
> To quit him with this arm?"
>
> (V, ii, 62-68)

What are we to make of the theory that Claudius is playing into Hamlet's hands when we see that Hamlet fails to employ the apparent advantage which has been given him? What, indeed, except that Claudius is again too shrewd for his nephew? Hamlet's mouth is shut.

Claudius foresees every contingency except supernatural interference. He, and he alone, has done the murder. No one suspects him, not even Gertrude. This secret is safe. But the secret of the love affair can not be safe. Two are involved; the going and comings of the lovers obviously can not be concealed, or at best, can be concealed for a short time only, after which—scandal. What is he to do?

Let us suppose that Claudius postpones the marriage to a time that will seem proper and decent—two months, six months, a year. Criticism will be stopped, it is true, but gossip will begin. Gertrude adores him. He can not well stay away from her. Her attitude will cause comment. She will be, besides, in torments of conscience which he can not control. His own freedom of action will be curtailed. Does any one doubt that in this event the names of the present king, and the late queen of Denmark will be in everybody's mouth; that suspicion will rise into certainty; that certainty will become curious and turn back to the origin of this public love affair; that forgotten incidents will be revived and imaginary incidents, invented, until Hamlet, far from lacking cause for rebellion will be hard put to it to find a pretext for quiescence, and Denmark, sore pressed by her enemies, will be embarrassed at home by

division among her rulers, and by a hideous and ugly scandal? Does anyone doubt that this will follow the postponement of the marriage as surely as the night the day? Has not young Hamlet, in the actual situation, become suspicious in less than a month? (I, ii) Can Claudius expect that Gertrude will dissemble—Gertrude, who hung on old Hamlet

> "As if increase of appetite had grown
> By what it fed on,"
>
> (I, ii, 144-145)

who was next

> "Like Niobe, all tears"
>
> (I, ii, 149)

(and Hamlet never questions the sincerity of his mother's emotions, wondering merely at their frank and constant change—"Frailty, thy name is woman"), and who conceals matters so poorly that the young prince employs fifteen lines of blank verse and sarcasm to impress upon her the elementary necessity of secrecy so far as he is concerned—how long could Gertrude act a part with her lover near her, and both under the great white light that beats upon a throne?

The king takes the better and the wiser course. If the marriage be promptly concluded, scandal is stopped. Gossip may toy awhile (as it does) with the theme, but the thing done, all mouths are sealed. When there is no living impediment to such a marriage, people do not inquire too curiously into the past of the couple. And if they do inquire; if they discover that in its origins the passion of Gertrude for Claudius was adulterous—what then? Who now can complain? Who is injured? Old Hamlet is dead. The lovers have taken the one recognized step for legitimizing their affection. Young Hamlet, by this expeditious marriage, is neatly placed in the predicament of condemning the desire of guilty lovers to wash away their guilt and regularize their union!

We have forgotten under the impact of such modern plays as *Hindle Wakes* and *The Eldest Son* how completely the

convention was established in Elizabethan times and throughout dramatic history until our own day, that marriage is the sufficient answer to the accusation of immorality in sexual matters; or rather, if we do not forget this fact (witness the movies), we do not appreciate the force with which it stopped discussion in Shakespeare's age. At the conclusion of *Measure for Measure,* for instance, the despicable Claudio is thought to be sufficiently rehabilitated in the eyes of the world (and the audience) when the duke commands him to take Mariana home "and marry her instantly." As for Lucio in the same play,

> "Proclaim it, provost, round about the city—
> If any woman [has been] wrong'd by this lewd fellow,
> ...let her appear
> And he shall marry her; the nuptial finish'd,
> Let him be whipp'd and hang'd."

But everybody is satisfied when, upon protest, the duke continues:

> "Upon mine honour, thou shalt marry her.
> ...and therewithal
> Remit thy other forfeits."

The conclusion of *All's Well That Ends Well* is stuffed with similar sentiments. The Hero-plot of *Much Ado About Nothing* turns on an equally significant interpretation of marriage and sexual guilt. Beaumont and Fletcher are full of it. So are others, notably Heywood. Shakespeare adopts the most common stage device in the world to make his lovers in this play seem wholly virtuous; increasing thereby the breathlessness of the plot and Hamlet's perplexity; and it is no wonder, in view of the promptness with which Claudius avails himself of this recognized and undebatable device for exhibiting, as it were, repentance, and making reparation to the woman in the case (supposing him ever to be charged with guilt in this love affair)—it is no wonder that Hamlet, helpless before the fact of the marriage and the general acquiescence in it, cries out:

"The spirit that I have seen
May be the devil; ...
...yea, and perhaps
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds
More relative than this. The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king."
(II, ii, 594-601)

Other considerations being for the moment waived, what can the most rigid casuist desire that Claudius and Gertrude do not?

There is, however, another respect which makes an immediate marriage not only morally desirable, but practically expedient. This is clearly the international situation. Upon the death of the late king and the accession of Claudius, a man unknown outside of Denmark, the nations of the north have sought immediately to test the mettle of the new ruler, placing Denmark in great peril. If Claudius does not marry Gertrude, there are obviously three aspirants to the Danish crown: Claudius, who has seized the power; Gertrude, the widow of the last king; and Hamlet, who considers that he is a candidate for the election. Be they ever so amicable at the start, a quarrel must result. Three mutually hostile parties will form in the court and the nation. Foreign peoples will have a golden opportunity to play one faction against the other, or to seize the power as Fortinbras actually does—when, between two of these parties, Claudius and Hamlet, the crown comes tumbling into his lap. What is politically expedient? What is the best political morality? Is it not a prompt union of the potential rivals and a common front against the enemy? Fortunately two of the three are already on terms of intimacy, and Claudius promptly—and wisely—marries the widow of the last king, at the same time seeking to attach the third party to him by public proclamation: Hamlet is to be his heir. Laying this solution before the court, or at least that part of it which pertains to Gertrude, he receives their hearty support; and takes occasion at the first public ceremony since the funeral, tactfully to announce the event, to deprecate

the seeming slight to his brother's memory, and to indicate the cause for haste: the state, "by our late dear brother's death" must not become "disjoint and out of frame" as Fortinbras fondly believes it will.[27]

Under this count, wherein is Claudius guilty? It is useless to argue that a high and fine nature in Claudius's place would have—what shall we say? Confessed, and gone into a monastery? Denmark would have gone to ruin. It is useless to argue that a high and fine nature, in Gertrude's place, would have renounced her love and gone on mourning for a man she cared nothing about. That is to condemn her to life-long hypocrisy. The world is not run by motives that are ten feet high. The high and fine thing is a prompt marriage, whereby Denmark is saved and Gertrude becomes, as the phrase goes, an honest woman; and then a long penitence and reform—such contrition as we see beginning to work in both before the play ends. Human motives are tangled; but the life of a ruler is not his own, as Shakespeare's histories and tragedies so clearly show, and though Claudius is guilty enough in other ways, it takes an absolutist of the type of Hamlet to find a distinct moral wrong in the fact that Claudius married Gertrude a month after the funeral. The act, at the most, is questionable; it is, however, defensible, and from two or three points of view, it is absolutely to be justified.

We might wish that Gertrude did not love Claudius, but she does. We might wish (with Hamlet) that she loved her husband, but she does not. We might wish (with the casuist) that she truly mourned for him, but she does not, and there is no way to compel her. We might even wish that she renounce the world, but none of Shakespeare's women, though occasionally they talk of so doing, are of this type. Shakespeare knew that renunciation is usually to dodge the human problem, not to struggle with it, and in the present instance especially, to renounce the world would be to equivocate and fail. Gertrude, like Claudius, is a ruler, and her life is not all her own.[28]

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[27] *Disjoint* is admirably and particularly chosen to describe the possibility ahead.

[28] Coriolanus, Brutus, and Antony, to go no further, are in the same predicament; what is privately desirable can not be made to square with what is publicly a duty.

Hamlet also charges that the marriage is incestuous. Since the contracting parties are not blood relations, this objection seems to many of us strange, and we do not know why Hamlet thus characterizes the union until we remember that the theological law of Shakespeare's day, despite Henry VIII and the Reformation, was still that of the Roman Catholic church. From the theological point of view the marriage comes within the forbidden unions, and is therefore incestuous. It is pertinent to secure the opinion of the church.

"Three . . . impediments," says Simon Augustine Blackmore, S. J.,[29] "directly affected Claudius and in fact any one of them sufficed to invalidate his attempted (*sic*) marriage with the Queen. The first was the law that prohibited one from marrying his deceased brother's wife without a dispensation."[30] "The second concerned the criminal seduction of a consort on the promise of marriage after the death of the husband. . . The third impediment was a law which prohibited and nullified the marriage of the man who murdered the husband of his accomplice in adultery in order to marry her." From these premises Father Blackmore argues that "the marriage of Claudius was only putative or supposed, and therefore null and void, and this fact he [Shakespeare] would impress upon our minds by frequent repetitions."[31]

Unfortunately the lines which Father Blackmore cites do not prove what he wants them to prove;[32] they merely indicate Hamlet's desire that his mother shall cease to have relations with Claudius, and Gertrude's confession of a guilty conscience. Far from repeating that the marriage is "only putative or supposed" Shakespeare at no time says

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[29]*The Riddle of Hamlet and the Newest Answers*, Boston, 1917, pp. 46-49. All of chapter VII (Hamlet's Right to the Crown) is of interest at this point. Father Blackmore believes that Hamlet was a good Catholic.

[30]See *Leviticus* 18:16 and 20:21. Father Blackmore could strengthen his case by calling attention to the penalty attached to such a union. "They shall be childless," runs the second passage.

[31]Op. cit., p. 51.

[32]Act III, Sc. iv, 88-93; 94-96; 140-152; 156--160. Father Blackmore prints these as though they were all one passage.

that the marriage was only "supposed." Claudius announces the completed marriage in open court. Hamlet thinks of it as legal:

> "the funeral baked-meats
> Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.
> Would I had met my dearest foe in heaven
> Or ever I had seen that day, Horatio!"
> (I, ii, 180-183)

Does Father Blackmore suppose that they had a wedding banquet without any wedding? The ghost, in saying

> "Let not the royal bed of Denmark be
> A couch for luxury and damned incest,"

does not imply anything except disgust with the acts of Claudius and Gertrude; does not imply, in short, that the wedding was "supposed." And weak as the church in Denmark is represented to be,[33] we can not imagine that the king and queen of Denmark are living together without a wedding ceremony having been performed. There would have been instant reproof from the church; the stubborn priest can say at Ophelia's grave:

> "No more be done:
> We should profane the service of the dead
> To sing a requiem and such rest to her
> As to peace-parted souls,"
> (V, i, 229-232)

against the wishes of the court and the royal command, and he would have been equally zealous to prevent the open scandal Father Blackmore's statement presupposes. Royal marriages are not made in the dark, nor was this; a ceremony that satisfied the court and the participants, a ceremony that seemed legal, a ceremony, indeed, that must have satisfied the officiating minister, was performed; a priest officiated at it; and Hamlet is helpless. The marriage was

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[33] ". . . the Church which alone could act in the matter had in Denmark no representative with sufficient power to derogate from the law." Op. cit., p. 46.

not "attempted"; it was completed to the satisfaction of every one concerned.

Unfortunately for this critic also, there is no ground for supposing that the second law he quotes can operate in this case: that concerning "the criminal seduction of a consort on the promise of marriage after the death of her husband." Since Gertrude did not know of the murder (on Father Blackmore's own showing), she could not have been seduced "on the promise of marriage after the death of her husband" because she did not know when her husband was going to die. For all she knew old Hamlet might live to be a hundred. Not even a very stupid person could be seduced by a promise of this sort.

The case rests, then, upon the first and third of the ecclesiastical prohibitions cited by the reverend father. Let us consider that forbidding "incest." Once again the attentive reader must be struck by the fact that Hamlet is the only one who objects; and that he does not object to anybody but himself until some months after the ceremony! Even then he does not tell Horatio that the marriage was incestuous; he says merely that the king has "whored"—i. e., debauched—his mother. The play scene, with its close parallel to the story of Gertrude and Claudius, marriage and all, is staged in order that Horatio may with the very comment of his soul observe the uncle and discover if his occulted guilt does not unkennel itself in one speech—concerning what?

> "One scene [that] comes near the circumstance
> Which I have told thee of my father's death."
>
> (III, ii, 74-75)

There is no mention of incest here! And Hamlet does not tell his mother she has committed incest—he tells her that she is a spiritual traitor to his father. The sole time that Hamlet mentions incest to anyone in the play is when he stabs his uncle:

> "Here, thou incestuous, murderous, damned Dane,
> Drink off this potion."
>
> (V, ii, 317-318)

Now a more powerful, a more crushing charge, than the charge of incest can hardly be imagined, but Hamlet does not make such a charge; like so many of his arguments, it will not work; others do not—it is clear—view the marriage with abhorrence for the reason that Hamlet, and Father Blackmore, advance.[34]

The church itself has, by its representative, performed the ceremony. This is plain. Claudius, far from palliating the charge of incest, publicly announces the relation of Gertrude to his brother and himself:

> "...our sometime sister, now our queen,
> .....
> Have we...
> Taken to wife."
>
> (I, ii, 8-14)

This is strange language for a marriage that is only putative or supposed. Furthermore, nobody objects. The court could see nothing improper in the proceeding; sanctioned it, indeed, without a dissenting voice. The church—strong enough to prevent the Christian burial of Ophelia—makes no move to annul the marriage, once it has been performed, though one would suppose that a clever man like Hamlet might set in motion the enginery of that church to help him toward his end. And Hamlet does not tell his mother to dissolve the marriage—he asks her to abstain from his uncle's bed; but she remains, nonetheless, the legal wife of Claudius. In short, there is a difficulty here that Father Blackmore does not meet.

In this respect it is clear that the theological law is but one point of view. *Hamlet* is a product of the Renaissance. It was written for the Globe Theatre, and for an audience which viewed Catholic Spain with abhorrence, remembered the reign of Bloody Mary, and approved of the beheading

[34] I have fallen into a contradiction of language here more apparent than real. I am examining every possible statement that Hamlet makes against his uncle; most of these are found in the soliloquies or in the scene with the ghost. It is noteworthy how few of Hamlet's charges are made public.

of Catholic Mary Stuart. As a matter of practical dramaturgy Shakespeare could not expect to impress his audience with the horror of the marriage by the employment of a weapon of Catholic theology. Hamlet, moreover, is a scholar, a philosopher, and a sceptic, who doubts the ghost he has seen, doubts the purgatory the ghost comes from, doubts whether the after life be the Catholic heaven or

> "something after death,
> The undiscover'd country from whose bourn
> No traveller returns,"[35]
>
> (III, i, 78-80)

until his perplexity

> "puzzles the will,
> And makes us rather bear those ills we have
> Than fly to others that we know not of."
>
> (III, i, 80-82)

Hamlet, in fine, is no Catholic to whom such a marriage would be abhorrent merely because it was "theological incest."[36] We must conclude, in fine, that the incest prohibition did not seem to Hamlet or the court or the audience of that time, an ultimate test of moral truth, but represented a conflict of standards—a conflict peculiarly characteristic of a dramatic product of the English Renaissance and of a country which had had its Henry VIII. It is Hamlet who utters the pregnant line: "there's nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."[37]

The king, says Father Blackmore, is "theoretically a Catholic."[38] The same writer characterizes the king's soliloquy as "terribly in earnest and sincere," "the heart-searching of a guilty soul that exhibits more clearly in the concrete than would an abstract treatise, all the elements

[35]It is strange how few have noted that the ghost is a traveller returning from that bourn and bringing information about it, and that Hamlet doubts both the information and the ghost.

[36]I say that Hamlet *doubts*, not *denies*. Hamlet of course speaks of heaven and hell and recognizes the validity of prayer when he watches the king on his knees. But he is not a thorough believer.

[37]II, ii, 249.

[38]Op. cit., p. 315.

of the Catholic doctrine of repentance. . . . when attempting to burst asunder the captive bonds that hold him enslaved in sin."[39] Yet this king who searches his heart, who "exhibits *all* the elements of the Catholic doctrine of repentance" does not even think of the sin of incest he has committed, than which not even murder is more black and damnable! His thought is entirely upon the assassination and its effects—crown, ambition, queen—but it does not occur to him when he searches his heart, that his marriage is an incestuous one. If he considered it such, it would be difficult not to think that his heart would be as chilled by the thought of so awful a crime.

There is still another factor which must be taken into account. Beyond a certain point in tragedy, horror may not go. Now there are horrors enough in *Hamlet* without the addition of incest. Adultery and assassination usher it in, a ghost begins it, there are one case of real insanity and one of supposed insanity, we have one case of suicide, one of attempted assassination, one of riot and attempted assassination, two instances of avowed revenge, two murders off stage, and five deaths on the stage, four of which occur within five minutes of one another, and the whole ends with the conquest of the country by a foreign army. Even for an Elizabethan play this is a good deal. To suppose that Shakespeare intended to add to this accumulation of violence, horror's crown of horror—incest—is to suppose him lacking in sound dramatic sense. What, then, is our way out of the difficulty?

We may suppose simply that the church sanctioned the marriage. Father Blackmore states that canon law "prohibited one from marrying his deceased brother's wife *without a dispensation.*" Obviously, even in the eyes of the church, this sort of incest is not absolute: dispensations can be obtained. And since no one—not even Hamlet—questions the legality of the marriage, since a ceremony was performed and a priest must have performed it, we may, if we like, assume that Claudius secured a dispensation. But I think it is simpler to assume that the whole matter

[39]Op. cit.

seemed to Shakespeare of minor importance. He was not writing a play that turned on Catholic theology. The question of whether the marriage violates canon law was not his dramatic problem.[40] Hence, he does not indicate whether a dispensation was obtained or not, simply because that question seemed to him to possess little consequence, one way or the other. And much of the language that he gives to Hamlet makes quite as good sense if we remember that "incestuous"[41] was used in Elizabethan times, to designate not only incest, but adultery, or loosely, all violations of sexual ethics. Accordingly, if we sum up our examination of the problem, we must conclude, I believe, that the question of whether the marriage of Gertrude and Claudius was incestuous seemed to all concerned—to Shakespeare and his audience, to the court, to Claudius himself, to Gertrude, even to Hamlet—either a matter of little moment or a purely technical violation of church law, which Hamlet might or might not use in his denunciation of Claudius as he found it expedient to do so.

For Father Blackmore advances a third and more substantial reason for our dislike of the marriage in *Hamlet*. Canon law, he says, prohibits and nullifies the marriage of a man who murdered the husband of his accomplice in order to marry her. The author very properly qualifies his language by admitting that this impediment was unknown to the queen. Hence, the guilt of the act is not hers, but Claudius', and his guilt arises, not from the marriage but from the murder that is the cause of the marriage. We come back, in other words, to our original position, that the murder of his brother is Claudius' tragic fault. We sympathize with Hamlet, we turn from the guilty couple, because theology and universal moral judgment here coincide; we feel that it is wrong for a man to murder his mistress' husband.

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[40]In point of law in Elizabethan England, "marriage required no religious ceremony for its validity, although the omission of it was an offence." *Shakespeare's England*, Vol. I (1917), Chap. XIII, *Law*, by Arthur Underhill.

[41]However, it should be noted that Shakespeare uses "incestuous" but five times: Hamlet I, ii, 157; I, v, 42; III, iii, 90; V, ii, 336; King Lear, III, ii, 55; and that his usage is consistent. See Schmidt's *Lexicon* and Barlett's *Concordance*.

And when we have admitted this, we observe that the dramatic problem of the play increases in interest. For Gertrude, like Oedipus, in this respect is an unwitting offender. She is guilty of adultery, but she believes that she has legitimized her passion by the marriage with Claudius, and at the same time the audience knows what she does not know: that Claudius is a murderer and that the marriage is unholy. Our pity goes out to her. And by a fine and subtle piece of work on Shakespeare's part, she never learns, so to speak, why it is that we condemn her. She never learns that Claudius has killed her first husband. And if we examine the question of why Shakespeare never lets her learn this fact, we see at once the reason: she is, after all, a subordinate character; he has time, following Hamlet's denunciation of her treason to his father's memory, to paint her sense of guilt, but in the rush of the play, he could not have time to paint the horror that would come over her, did she learn that her husband was the guiltiest man in Denmark. From her point of view he has done no evil; he is her lover, and she worships him; he has not, like herself, betrayed the trust of marriage. Did she learn that her soul's idol was an assassin, and an assassin of her husband, her sense of guilt, her horror, her remorse, would as it were, stop the play and usurp the center of the action at the very time when all must be concentrated upon Hamlet. And did she believe in addition that the marriage was incestuous, her tragic situation would be unbearable. Accordingly, Shakespeare confines her guilt to the guilt of the love affair, and stresses the guilt of Claudius as being the guilt of murder.

Claudius has murdered his brother, his mistress' husband. That is the sole dramatic reason why the marriage is universally to be condemned. The offense can not be palliated, can not be extenuated. It is great, it is criminal. But Claudius differs from Macbeth. He is strong enough to keep the secret to himself. In the utmost torture of his soul he does not, like his Scotch brother, torment his wife with his remorse. Policy, perhaps; even cowardice; yet what would he gain by confessing all to Gertrude?

After his fashion he loves her, and he is just enough not to add to her own sense of guilt by informing her that she has married a fratricide. The problem is his, and he keeps it. In this respect Hamlet and the ghost approve his judgment, for both feel it unnecessary and unfair to drag Gertrude into the guilt of the assassination.

For *Hamlet* is not, after all, a theological problem, but a problem in the ethics of conduct. Moral judgments tend to be negative and barren of results. The murder was wrong in triple sense, but it is done, and being done, what is Claudius to do? It is easy to say, let him confess, let him refrain from marrying the queen. If he confesses, Denmark will go to pieces. If he refrains from marrying the queen, he leaves Gertrude in a fearful situation, and adds to her burden that which she has no business to bear. And last and most curious of all, there is no tribunal to which he can appeal. As king, he is the fountainhead of justice in the state. He can not appeal to the church, which is at once a negligible factor at Elsinore, and at cross purposes with itself: it compromises on the question of the marriage, it compromises in the funeral of Ophelia. He can not appeal to his conscience:

> "O what form of prayer
> Can serve my turn? 'Forgive me my foul murder'?
> That can not be..."

Of all Shakespeare's characters is there any in so fearful a situation as he?

(5) *Claudius is a murderer who has* (*a*) *killed his brother and and* (*b*) *attempted the assassination of Hamlet.* We are brought at length to the great problem of Claudius' tragic guilt. Of Hamlet's five charges, the first and second are not true; the third is open to argument; the fourth is true only in a limited degree; and the fifth remains. Claudius has murdered his king. Worse than that, this king was his paramour's husband. Worse than that, it was fratricide. Furthermore, the murder was deliberate, cold-blooded and ingenious. Nothing can alter, nothing can

change it. From this one initial crime springs all the guilt and sorrow of the play, a tale of

> "carnal, bloody and unnatural acts,
> Of accidental judgements, casual slaughters,
> Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
> .....
> Fall'n on the inventors' heads."
>
> (V, ii, 373-377)

That Claudius is neither a fool nor a mere villain must by this time be clear. Why, then, did he kill his brother? Because he desired to become king. But why did he desire to become king? Shakespeare does not answer this question because to do so would complicate an already complicated play. We may surmise what we please. Envy, selfishness, ambition—all the complex motives of a man who trusts more to his head than to his heart, enter into the answer; and we must never forget that in executing the murder, Claudius was as cool, as crafty, and as cunning as any Italian villain. We may surmise what we please. What sustained him in his hours of watching Hamlet for an opportunity to do the deed? Was it mere envy? Was it not rather the itch of competency to seize the office in which Claudius felt his extraordinary powers would have their widest play? As between the bluff Hamlet and the Italianate Claudius did he feel that he, Claudius, was the man born to be king? However these things may be, it is clear that Claudius, lacking as he is in passion, did not perform the murder out of personal envy alone, but rather out of a complex of motives, in which a feeling of competency, a conviction of the worth of his own powers, played no small share.

And so, combining desire and policy, Claudius seduces Gertrude and murders Hamlet. Having seduced the queen he comes, in his fashion, to love her. Having murdered his brother, he comes to repent. He begins his new life by striving to wipe out all memory of the deed; he does not speak of it even to himself. He comes to the throne amid general approbation, and promptly and skillfully seizes the

reins of government. There is no move which a wise ruler should make that he does not make. His public character awakens respect, his private life is admirable. No one knows of his crime. He resolves to do penance for it by a life devoted to wise and good actions—he will be a sagacious ruler, a devoted husband, a careful and considerate father.

Then there crosses his path the one man he has striven to conciliate. For reasons inexplicable to Claudius this man exhibits a settled hostility to the king. It is the son of the man he has murdered. Like Macbeth before Macduff, Claudius does not desire more of that blood upon his hands. His conscience is beginning to gnaw at him; he even pictures that he can make reparation to the son for the wrong done the father: he will give to Hamlet the crown he took from the murdered man, and so he resolves to make of Hamlet a competent and careful king. But Hamlet suddenly exhibits a strange and iron resolve, a bitter determination to treat Claudius as an enemy. The king endeavors to search out the springs of this determination, and fails: it is not ambition, it is not love, it is not any public expression of hostility to the marriage, for Hamlet makes none. For the present no other possibility occurs to him.

When the king sets spies on Hamlet, we jump to the conclusion that he is a mean, treacherous villain. But is he necessarily one? He could have set assassins in their stead. Macbeth, who also kills a king, murders Banquo on a pretext more shadowy than Hamlet's "madness"—a riddle justifies the deed. Iago stabs Roderigo with the same calmness and lack of motive with which he misleads Othello. The path of Richard is a path of blood. The bastard Edmund forges letters and engineers assassinations like a super-butcher. Clearly Claudius is none of these. Hamlet is the king's enemy, but Claudius does not imitate the other Shakespearian villains; the life of Hamlet is precious to Gertrude, to the state, to the future—and he forbears to strike. It is not, as with Brutus, weakness of will. It is not, as with Antony, the vacillation of passion. It is not, as with Macbeth, sheer indecision. At the time he reaches his crucial decision concerning Hamlet, his sagacity, his foresight,

his promptness in reaching conclusions were never better. Clearly, his decision is a deliberate one. Why does not Claudius contrive Hamlet's assassination? It is because Hamlet is the incarnation of that reparation which he dare not publicly make.

Then suddenly this inveterate enemy springs a trap—the play. Claudius at last learns that Hamlet knows his secret—how or why he can not discover. Does he, like the great Shakespearian villains, immediately scheme for Hamlet's death? Instead, his conscience flares up; he retires from the hall "marvellous distempered"—with choler, says Guildenstern, excitedly seeking words in the confusion, but we see in a moment what species of choler this was. Not yet does he resolve to kill his enemy; he will remove him to England. Then we see him struggling with the burden of his guilt:

"O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven;
It hath the primal eldest curse upon't,
A brother's murder. Pray can I not,
Though inclination be as sharp as will:
My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent,
And like a man to double business bound,
I stand in pause where I shall first begin,
And both neglect. What if this cursed hand
Were thicker than itself with brother's blood,
Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
To wash it white as snow? Whereto serves mercy
But to confront the visage of offense?
And what's in prayer but this twofold force,
To be forestalled ere we come to fall,
Or pardon'd being down? Then I'll look up;
My fault is past. But O, what form of prayer
Can serve my turn? 'Forgive me my foul murder'?
That cannot be, since I am still possess'd
Of those effects for which I did the murder,
My crown, mine own ambition and my queen.
May one be pardon'd and retain the offence?
In the corrupted currents of this world
Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice,
And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself
Buys out the law: but 'tis not so above;

There is no shuffling, there the action lies
In his true nature, and we ourselves compell'd
Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults
To give in evidence. What then? What rests?
Try what repentance can: what can it not ?
Yet what can it when one can not repent?
O wretched state! O bosom black as death!
O limed soul, that struggling to be free
Art more engaged! Help, angels! make assay!
Bow, stubborn knees, and, heart with strings of steel,
Be soft as sinews of the new-born babe!
All may be well."

(III, iii, 36-72)

For concentrated torment there is nothing like this in all Shakespeare, save the last of *Othello*. The man of strong will is in a blind alley wherein his will can not help him: he who has affirmed the world must now affirm the spirit, and can not. So terrible is his anguish, so sincere his struggle that his inveterate enemy, coming upon him at so opportune a moment, stays his hand:

"O, this is hire and salary, not revenge."

(III, iii, 79)

There is for Claudius no loophole, no hope of peace:

"My words fly up, my thoughts remain below:
Words without thoughts never to heaven go."

(III, iii, 97-98)

In proportion as the struggle with Hamlet grows more and more deadly, the struggle of the king with himself increases in bitterness. Claudius learns from Gertrude that he has been the indirect cause of the death of one of his dearest friends:

"O heavy deed!
It had been so with us, had we been there:
His liberty is full of threats to all,
To you yourself, to us, to everyone."

(IV, i, 12-15)

And what is the king's half-sincere conclusion?

> "Alas, how shall this bloody deed be answer'd?
> It will be laid to us, whose providence
> Should have kept short, restrain'd and out of haunt,
> This mad young man: but so much was our love,
> We would not understand what was most fit,
> But, like the owner of a foul disease,
> To keep it from divulging, let it feed
> Even on the pith of life."
>
> (IV, i, 16-23)

His duty as an individual is at direct odds with his duty as king. And he can not tell Gertrude the truth, he must play the hypocrite even with her: it is part of his punishment. In the extremity of this strange duel in the dark he has forgotten that he does not stand a single man; he is the state; all depends upon him; and yet the affection of the woman who worships him is bound up with the very life of his inveterate enemy. He has come to the parting of the ways. Where shall he turn? What shall he do? His opponent forces him to more and more fearful measures. How far has he departed from the path he originally marked out for himself! He must decide on action; against his very will he must decide. He has no illusions as to what he is doing:

> "diseases desperate grown
> By desperate appliance are relieved,
> *Or not at all.*"
>
> (IV, iii, 9-11)

He makes his great decision, and it is wrong. He decides that Hamlet must die. It is the second great crisis of his life, but unlike the first, this is not wholly of his choosing. It is the old story of the ineluctibility of evil:

> "Howe'er my haps, my joys were ne'er begun."
>
> (IV, iii, 68)

He can not perform the penance he had planned. When Hamlet is at length out of the country, the king accordingly looks around him. All that he had dreamed on is quite, quite o'erthrown:

"O Gertrude, Gertrude,
When sorrows come, they come not single spies,
But in battalions! First, her father slain:
Next, your son gone: and he most violent author
Of his own just remove: the people muddied,
Thick and unwholesome in their thoughts and whispers,
For good Polonius' death; and we have done but greenly
In hugger-mugger to inter him; poor Ophelia
Divided from herself and her fair judgement,"
(IV, v, 74-82)

and the country, under the leadership of Laertes, is rushing to rebellion. In the accents of despair he concludes:

"O my dear Gertrude, this,
Like to a murdering-piece, in many places
Gives me superfluous death,"
(IV, v, 91-93)

and he concludes that his punishment is too great for his crime. It is his privilege to strike back.

He quells the riot, and wins Laertes to him, and the victory gives him courage. He tells Laertes:

"you must not think
That we are made of stuff so flat and dull
That we can let our beard be shook with danger
And think it pastime. You shortly shall hear more."
(IV, vii, 30-33)

And lo! like an avenging fury, he receives at that moment a letter from the enemy he supposed to be dead. The last that is good in Claudius disappears. He could say with Macbeth:

"I am in blood
Stepp'd in so far, that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er,"

except that, unlike Macbeth, he has done but one murder. From that time a kind of fixed insanity seizes him, and the destruction of Hamlet becomes his mania, and he gives up everything—consideration for Gertrude, the affairs of

state, his own conscience—to the one aim of wiping out this shadow in black, this nemesis out of Wittenberg.

Hamlet returns to Elsinore. He knows all. They meet like wary fencers at the grave of Hamlet's love. Claudius knows that in the perfect armor of his defence Hamlet has at last found a flaw; that he has documentary evidence that will serve to convince the court of the king's treachery. A cold fury seizes the king; it is now or never; and he concentrates with all his skill, all his iron power of will, upon the final scene. It will be worthy of his genius. He will play off the son of one murdered man against the son of another murdered man; the one shall be ostensibly in the wrong, the other ostensibly seeking justice. This time there shall be no escape, for Laertes is a master of the foils. He will play on Hamlet's vanity; Hamlet

> "being remiss,
> Most generous and free from all contriving,
> Will not peruse the foils, so that with ease,
> Or with a little shuffling, you may choose
> A sword unbated."
>
> (IV, vii, 134-138)

If, by a miracle, the contrivance should fail, Laertes shall anoint his rapier with a poison such that

> "no cataplasm so rare,
> Collected from all simples that have virtue
> Under the moon, can save the thing from death
> That is but scratched withal."
>
> (IV, vii, 143-146)

And if by a second miracle the poisoned sword should fail, the king will prepare a deadly cup. But all fails in the very moment of success; he who commanded events is by them commanded, and by a kind of cold sarcasm, the last words the king hears on earth are:

> "Here, thou incestuous, murderous, damned Dane,
> Drink off this potion,"
>
> (V, ii, 336-337)

and yet to every one of these charges he could plead how human and how sorrowful an excuse!

Hamlet is a family tragedy. But it is more, it is a royal tragedy, a duel between two opposite conceptions of morality. How much has Claudius a right to yield to the state in the conduct of his private life? How much has Hamlet a right to demand from the state in the pursuance of his private vengeance? Has Claudius any justification in killing old Hamlet, though the public good results therefrom? Has young Hamlet a right to murder Claudius, who is an able and a needed king? On the one hand there is the worldly uncle, mature, able, a shrewd leader of men, every inch a king, the salvation of Denmark, an accomplished diplomat, the man for the place and the hour; but his career is founded upon private crime, and although from such a crime innumerable benefits flow, it remains a crime to the end. On the other hand is the scholar Hamlet, adroit in his own way, every inch a prince, but by nature independent and solitary, unskilled in government, young, a philosopher and not a politician, a poet, not a governor of men, intent upon the laudable purpose of exposing and punishing the assassin of his father, and in the pursuit of his object, pulling down the whole structure of Danish government, causing five times the misery that Claudius ever caused, defeating at length the utmost skill of his opponent but only at the cost of his own life and of the independence of his country. The love of Gertrude is the king's one source of comfort; it is for Hamlet a low infatuation, and in the conflict the queen like all the rest goes down to destruction. The torment of Cladius is subjective and individual, and while it so remains Denmark is saved. The conscience of Hamlet goes out from him like a destroying angel, blasting all it touches—Ophelia, Gertrude, Polonius, Guildenstern, Rosencrantz, Laertes, Denmark itself. Strange play and stranger paradoxes! The opposing forces are evenly matched, the duel is breathless, the question is not resolved until 82 lines before the end of the drama! And yet of this intense and breathless tragedy, so admirably illustrative of

Brunetière's law of the drama, our actors continue to make a dramatic poem in five acts, in which the hero, for want of an opponent worthy of him, wanders about the stage uttering soliloquies and indulging in pleasantry with the minor characters!

V

We can not treat a theatrical piece as if it were an essay on statecraft, and I do not suppose that the intricacies of the diplomatic background could all be packed into any production of the play, and made clear to every one, nor is it necessary that this should be done. The actor must know enormously more about his play than any spectator, and as the governmental problem, for instance, exists in *Hamlet* it is there for study. Indeed, only as the actor understands the position of Claudius in the economy of Denmark—only as the actor who plays Hamlet studies that same problem—can the part of the king be given that just emphasis, that careful and particularized study which will clarify the play by illuminating the peculiar difficulty of the king's ethical problem at the same time that it illuminates the ethical problem of the young prince and the obstacles against which he must contend. For drama is conflict, William Archer to the contrary, and in modern versions there is little conflict in *Hamlet*, and the reason is clear. If our analysis is anywhere near correct, it is clear that two great actors are required properly to present the tragedy—one in the part of Claudius, one in the part of the prince, and the more nearly they are matched in ability, the more exciting becomes the struggle, the more intense our interest, the more probable the bloody and terrific close.

Now in all that I have said, if I have seemed to depreciate the importance of Hamlet, it is not of my intent, but because Hamlet has overwhelmed the play. Hamlet is the hero of his tragedy. But to make Hamlet interesting does not require that we make Claudius unreal. Far from helping Hamlet, we have damaged the tragedy in so doing. The hero becomes great in proportion to the obstacle he

overcomes and (within due limits) the more complex and human we make Claudius, the greater is our interest in the prince. Up to a certain point, the more even the contest, the more breathlessly do we hang on the result. But I do not believe we can safely cross that line: the rivals can not be exactly matched; one or the other must prevail; we must take sides, and we take sides with the prince against the king. It is right and necessary that we do so. These are commonplaces, which I recall here only that I may not be misunderstood and that they may answer the objection that many have perhaps already made: why does not Shakespeare tell us more clearly what he means by Claudius? Why have we been wrong all these years?

The manner of the question (supposing it to be put) indicates that the problem is not clearly understood. It is not a question of the correctness of our information concerning Claudius so much as it is a question of the manner in which that information is to be presented. Hamlet is not the hero merely because we feel that he is more amiable than the king. Richard III is clearly the hero, King John is clearly the hero, of those plays, and they are not pleasant characters, nor is Macbeth. Indeed, the device of the villain as hero was not uncommon in Shakespeare's age. The hero is the hero normally because we know more about him than we do about anyone else. He is on the stage oftener, we hear more of him, we are informed of his plans, and his are the frequent soliloquies that make clear the motives of his action. We see him, as it were, in complete subjectivity. But the other characters we see more and more objectively as they are of decreasing importance. Two or three closest to the hero we know subjectively with sufficient authority to follow their movements with appreciation; the others scale down until we reach the lowest group —the first and second gentlemen, the servants and messengers, whom we know wholly objectively or nearly so. Each character in *Hamlet*, it has been remarked, could be made the center of a play.

Accordingly, we know Hamlet subjectively best of all.

In addition to the devices listed above, humor, which wins sympathy, is wholly related to him; either humorous characters (Osric, the grave-diggers) are seen only in relation to him, or other characters become humorous only in his vicinity (Polonius). Clearly, the most elementary tests of dramatic construction indicate, however, that after Hamlet Claudius is next in order of importance. Save one, the remaining soliloquies are his; it is of him and to him that people talk; he controls events, he thwarts the hero, and a certain sympathy is won for him when he is made the object of one of the love-interests of the play. Like Macbeth his character lacks comic relief for the reason that he bears the weightiest load of tragic guilt. Shakespeare does for him all that he can do without throwing the play wholly out of proportion. His bulk of spoken lines is next to that of Hamlet's. At the climax of the play we are given that admirable glimpse into his soul during the scene of his prayer. We know thereafter that he is in the wrong, and we are satisfied at the death he dies.

But to say that Claudius is in the wrong does not mean that he may not be trying to right himself, or prove that the hero is always right. If the hero were always right we should be displeased at Hamlet's death, but we are not. In other words, both Claudius and Hamlet are engaged in complex ethical problems, both in a sense fail, and the great difference between them is mainly that we know more of Hamlet's difficulties than we do of Claudius'. They are like two men, one of whom stands so close to us that we can watch the minutest expression of his face and eyes, whereas the other stands a little farther away, so that we have frequently to guess what he is saying and thinking, from a lesser amount of detail, a less adequate fund of information. In sum, Shakespeare tells us all that he ought to tell us about Claudius; we merely refuse to see it, largely because of the "stars" who have played the title-role.

It would be interesting to watch the results were the star to cast himself as Claudius instead of the prince. For the inequality between the parts is not great, and seems greater

only as our modern Hamlets have emphasized a disparity that is not so deep as they think. The "star" who plays Hamlet, like Aaron's rod, has swallowed up all the other parts, so that *Hamlet* is a play totally out of proportion (how badly askew a play may be thrown by undue emphasis on one part, witness Lord Dundreary and *Our American Cousin*), and the part of the prince has been overemphasized by two devices. In the first place, those minor characters against which the histrionic abilities of the actor would stick fiery off (Polonius, Ophelia, the grave-diggers) have been given undue importance. In the second place, modern cuttings have retained as many scenes as possible in which Hamlet might appear, and have sheared off the scenes in which he does not appear—and these last are scenes mainly dominated by the king. Accordingly, the play seems to break down toward the end. In the first and second acts Hamlet and the king are roughly of about equal importance; Act III is Hamlet's, but Act IV is the king's, and it is Act IV that has suffered. A different casting of the star would reverse this process with interesting results.